



KAUTILYA'S FOREIGN POLICY AND ITS CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE TO INDIA

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Abstract

Kautilya's Arthashastra remains a cornerstone of ancient Indian statecraft, offering a pragmatic approach to governance, diplomacy, and strategic policymaking. His Sadgunya (six-fold strategy) and Mandala Theory (circle of states) provide a framework for international relations, emphasizing realpolitik, power balance, and alliance-building. The Saptanga Theory (seven elements of the state) highlights essential components of a strong nation, while the principles of Sama (conciliation), Dana (gifts), Danda (force), and Bheda (division) continue to shape contemporary diplomatic strategies. This study employs a qualitative approach, using textual analysis of the Arthashastra and a comparative assessment of modern Indian foreign policy to evaluate the relevance of Kautilyan thought. The findings suggest that India's evolving foreign policy—shifting from post-independence idealism to strategic pragmatism—reflects enduring Kautilyan principles in areas such as non-alignment, economic diplomacy, military deterrence, and counterterrorism. As India navigates a rapidly changing global order, Kautilya's insights remain crucial in shaping a resilient and adaptive foreign policy.

Keywords: *Pragmatic approach, Diplomacy, Realpolitik, Strategic, Counter Terrorism.*

Introduction:

Kautilya, also known as Chanakya, was an ancient Indian scholar, economist, and strategist who authored the Arthashastra (circa 4th century BCE), a foundational text on political science and statecraft. His treatise provides a comprehensive framework on politics, economics, and diplomacy, emphasizing realpolitik approaches to power and foreign policy. Unlike the traditional perception that ancient Indian political thought was primarily

concerned with ethics and religion, Kautilya's work demonstrates a pragmatic and strategic approach to governance, often drawing comparisons with Machiavelli's *The Prince* (Vohra, 2018). His foreign policy theories were deeply rooted in realism, emphasizing power dynamics, diplomacy, and strategic warfare to ensure the strength and survival of the state. His theories, particularly the Mandala Theory and Sadgunya Doctrine, focus on power consolidation, alliance formation, and diplomatic maneuvering, which bear striking similarities to modern theories of international relations, particularly realism and geopolitics. This makes Kautilya's ideas highly relevant in the contemporary global landscape, including India's foreign policy strategies.

Scholars have analyzed Kautilya's influence on modern geopolitics. Singh (2016) highlights the Mandala Theory as a framework for understanding India's regional diplomacy, especially in managing its relationships with Pakistan and China. His work illustrates how the concept of immediate and distant neighbors as allies or adversaries continues to shape India's strategic decisions. Sharma (2022) extends this argument, emphasizing that Kautilya's principles of power pragmatism align with India's Indo-Pacific strategies and counterbalancing China's influence in South Asia.

Rajagopalan (2014) explores the broader implications of Kautilya's *realpolitik* in contemporary geopolitics, examining India's balancing acts in international diplomacy. His analysis suggests that Kautilya's strategic thought process is evident in India's multi-alignment policy, wherein India engages with global powers without compromising its strategic autonomy. Chousalkar (1986) investigates Kautilya's Saptanga Theory and Sadgunya Doctrine, outlining their relevance in statecraft, diplomacy, and governance. He highlights how these principles emphasize pragmatic decision-making by balancing power with ethical considerations.

Vohra (2018) offers a comparative perspective by linking Kautilya's insights with Western political theories, particularly Machiavelli's *The Prince*. He argues that Kautilya's strategies have influenced post-colonial governance in India, including Nehru's pragmatic policies that sought to balance ethical governance with strategic maneuvering. Despite these analyses, gaps remain in understanding how Kautilya's principles are applied in modern multilateral engagements, digital-age diplomacy, and India's evolving role in global governance.

This study seeks to analyze the contemporary relevance of Kautilya's foreign policy in the context of India's strategic interests. By examining the Mandala Theory and Sadgunya

Doctrine, it aims to explore how these ancient strategies influence India's diplomatic decisions, security alliances, and economic partnerships today.

Research Methodology

This research adopts an analytical approach, utilizing secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and government reports on Indian foreign policy. A qualitative content analysis method is employed to examine Kautilya's principles and their applicability in contemporary geopolitics. Comparative analysis is used to correlate historical strategies with present-day foreign policy frameworks.

Kautilya's Foreign Policy

Kautilya's foreign policy was pragmatic, advocating for a state to act in its self-interest, forming alliances when necessary and waging war when advantageous. His strategic framework is outlined in several key doctrines, including the Mandala Theory, the Shadgunya Siddhanta (Sixfold Foreign Policy), and the Upayas (Four Means of Diplomacy). These principles continue to resonate in India's diplomatic strategies, military posturing, and international relations today.

Mandala Theory: Geopolitical Strategy of Alliances and Rivalries

One of Kautilya's most significant contributions to foreign policy is the Mandala Theory, which provides a structural model for understanding interstate relations based on geographical proximity and power dynamics. The theory posits that a king's immediate neighbor is a natural enemy, whereas the neighbor's neighbor is a potential ally.

According to the Arthashastra, Kautilya explains:

"A king who is situated anywhere immediately on the circumference of the conqueror's territory is an enemy; he who is situated immediately beyond the enemy is friendly on account of common interests" (Kautilya, Arthashastra, Book VI, Chapter 2).

This concept is evident in modern international relations, particularly in India's engagement with its neighbors. For example, India's strategic partnerships with nations such as Japan and Vietnam serve as counterbalances to China's growing influence, just as the Mandala Theory suggests. Similarly, India's alliances with the United States, Australia, and France in the Indo-Pacific region reflect a strategic approach based on countering immediate threats and strengthening regional security.

Shadgunya Siddhanta: Sixfold Foreign Policy Strategies

Kautilya outlined six primary strategies that a ruler could adopt based on the kingdom's power and security status. These strategies, known as the Shadgunya Siddhanta, serve as

guidelines for foreign relations.

Sandhi (Treaty/Peace Agreement)

Kautilya suggested that when a kingdom is weaker or in need of time to prepare for future conflicts, it should enter into peace treaties with other states. This allows for the consolidation of power, economic strengthening, and military reorganization. In the modern context, India follows a similar approach in its border diplomacy, particularly in managing relations with China. Despite tensions in regions like Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, India engages in peace talks and agreements to prevent escalation while simultaneously strengthening its military presence.

Vigraha (War)

War, according to Kautilya, was not an option to be taken lightly but rather a necessary instrument of statecraft when diplomatic means fail or when the security of the state is at risk. If a kingdom is strong enough to defeat its enemy, war becomes a justified means of eliminating threats and securing its position. This principle resonates with India's military operations against cross-border terrorism. The Balakot airstrikes in 2019, conducted in response to the Pulwama terror attack, exemplify Kautilya's principle of war as a necessary means of deterrence.

Asana (Neutrality/Standoff)

Neutrality, or maintaining a position of inaction, is another strategy in Kautilya's sixfold policy. A state should remain neutral when engaging in conflict would be detrimental to its national interests. India has often employed this strategy in international conflicts where its direct involvement could compromise its strategic autonomy. A key example is India's stance on the Russia-Ukraine war, where India has maintained a neutral position while continuing to balance its economic and strategic ties with both Russia and the West.

Yana (Preparation for War)

When war appears inevitable, Kautilya advised that a ruler should engage in strategic preparation rather than entering conflict unprepared. This includes building alliances, modernizing military capabilities, and securing economic stability. In the contemporary era, India follows this principle by continuously enhancing its defense capabilities, acquiring advanced military technology, and strengthening its strategic alliances. The rapid modernization of the Indian Navy, coupled with strategic partnerships with countries like the United States and France, reflects the application of this principle.

Samsraya (Seeking Protection/Alliance Formation)

A state should seek alliances when it is unable to face a powerful adversary alone. This is evident in India's participation in multilateral defense groupings such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) with the US, Japan, and Australia. The QUAD serves as a strategic counterbalance to China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region, demonstrating how India continues to apply Kautilya's principle of strategic partnerships.

Dvaidhibhava (Dual Policy of Peace and War)

Kautilya also proposed a dual approach where diplomacy and military preparedness go hand in hand. This means maintaining diplomatic relations while being prepared to use force if necessary. India's policy toward Pakistan is a prime example of this approach. While India engages in diplomatic dialogues, it simultaneously takes military action against cross-border terrorism, such as conducting surgical strikes post-Uri attack in 2016.

Upayas: The Four Means of Diplomacy and Statecraft

Kautilya's Upayas (Four Means) provide a framework for managing relationships with other states through various diplomatic and strategic approaches.

Sama (Conciliation and Diplomacy)

Sama refers to resolving conflicts through dialogue and negotiations. This approach is evident in India's engagement with global powers through diplomatic channels, particularly in managing border disputes with China and Pakistan. Despite military tensions, India consistently participates in diplomatic talks to ensure peaceful conflict resolution.

Dana (Gifts and Economic Incentives)

Dana involves the use of financial or material incentives to influence other states. This principle is applied in India's foreign aid and economic diplomacy. India provides significant financial aid and development assistance to neighboring countries such as Nepal, Bhutan, and Afghanistan. Through infrastructure projects, trade agreements, and humanitarian aid, India strengthens its regional influence and secures strategic partnerships.

Bheda (Divide and Rule)

Bheda involves using internal divisions within adversaries to weaken them. While this strategy is not overtly employed in modern Indian diplomacy, intelligence operations and strategic counter-insurgency measures sometimes reflect its essence. India's ability to counter threats from external actors by leveraging diplomatic intelligence and regional coalitions aligns with this principle.

Danda (Force and Punishment)

Danda, or the use of force, is employed when diplomatic efforts fail. India has demonstrated this principle through decisive military actions against security threats. The 2016 surgical strikes and 2019 Balakot airstrikes are instances where India exercised military force to protect national security and deter future aggression.

Contemporary Relevance of Kautilya's Foreign Policy to India

Kautilya's Arthashastra presents a sophisticated and strategic framework for statecraft, diplomacy, and foreign relations. His principles, particularly the Mandala Theory and the Sadgunya Doctrine, advocate for pragmatic alliances, calculated power projection, and economic leverage in interstate relations (Boesche, 2003). These principles continue to hold contemporary relevance in shaping India's foreign policy, demonstrating how ancient Indian political thought remains applicable to modern geopolitical challenges.

After independence, India's foreign policy initially reflected an idealistic approach under Jawaharlal Nehru, emphasizing non-alignment, anti-colonialism, and global disarmament. This vision was embodied in the Panchsheel Agreement with China in 1954, built on the principles of peaceful coexistence. However, the 1962 Sino-Indian War shattered these aspirations, exposing the vulnerabilities of diplomacy unaccompanied by strategic preparedness. This event validated Kautilya's assertion that an overly idealistic approach to international relations invites exploitation by stronger adversaries (Mehta, 2019). A shift towards realism became evident under Indira Gandhi, who adopted a more pragmatic approach to alliances. The Indo-Soviet Treaty of 1971, ensuring Soviet support during the Bangladesh Liberation War, exemplified Kautilyan diplomacy—where alliances are instrumental in countering adversaries and securing national interests (Pant, 2009).

India's nuclear policy further underscores the influence of Kautilyan strategic thought. His doctrine of Vigraha (war preparedness) aligns with the country's nuclear strategy, recognizing the necessity of internal defense mechanisms for external security. The Pokhran nuclear tests of 1974 and 1998 demonstrated India's assertion of strategic autonomy, reinforcing its deterrence capabilities despite global sanctions (Singh, 2006). These decisions reflect Kautilya's argument that power consolidation is integral to sovereignty and state stability. By establishing itself as a responsible nuclear power, India secured a strategic position that aligns with Kautilyan principles of long-term state security.

Beyond military strength, Kautilya emphasized economic power as a fundamental pillar of statecraft, recognizing that economic policies serve as crucial instruments of influence.

India's contemporary economic strategies, including the Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative and leadership in BRICS and the G20, illustrate how economic self-sufficiency functions as a means of strategic positioning (Rangarajan, 1992). India's engagement with ASEAN and participation in the QUAD further highlight a pragmatic approach to regional diplomacy, leveraging economic and security alliances to counter growing hegemonies (Mohan, 2020).

Kautilya's Mandala Theory, which posits that neighboring states are natural adversaries while distant states can serve as allies, continues to guide India's regional engagements. Strategic investments in Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal serve as counterbalances to China's Belt and Road Initiative, allowing India to expand its regional influence through economic cooperation rather than direct confrontation (Basu, 2018). However, shifting political dynamics in Sri Lanka and the Maldives reveal the fluidity of alliances, necessitating continuous strategic recalibration—a principle central to Kautilya's thought (Sharma, 2021).

India's counterterrorism strategy also reflects Kautilya's Danda (coercive action) principle, advocating for military force when diplomatic negotiations fail. The 2016 surgical strikes and the 2019 Balakot airstrikes against terror camps in Pakistan demonstrate this approach, reinforcing deterrence through calculated military action (Kapur, 2020). This strategic assertiveness embodies Kautilyan realism, emphasizing the necessity of force when national security is threatened.

Despite these applications of Kautilyan principles, challenges persist in India's foreign policy execution. Institutional hesitations and coalition politics often result in reactive strategies rather than proactive decision-making (Menon, 2021). Kautilya advocated for adaptability and preemptive action, urging leaders to anticipate geopolitical shifts and act accordingly. In an increasingly multipolar world, India's ability to refine its long-term strategic vision will determine its capacity to maintain global influence while safeguarding national interests.

Conclusion:

Kautilya's Arthashastra offers a timeless strategic foundation for India's foreign policy, guiding its approach to diplomacy, security, and economic engagement. From the early days of non-alignment to the assertion of nuclear deterrence, economic statecraft, and counterterrorism strategies, India has effectively applied many of Kautilya's principles to navigate global challenges. However, as the geopolitical landscape continues to evolve, the need for adaptability and proactive decision-making remains crucial. By embracing Kautilyan pragmatism while refining its long-term strategic vision, India can strengthen its position as a global power while safeguarding its national interests in an increasingly complex world.

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