KAUTILYA'S MANDALA THEORY AND THE CONTEMPORARY STRATEGIC LANDSCAPE OF SOUTH ASIA

Prasenjit Roy [1], Surya Kanta Datta [2] & Uday Murmu [3]

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Author Details:

[1] Ph.D. Scholar (JRF),
Department of Political Science,
The University of Burdwan,
Burdwan, West Bengal, India;

[2] Ph.D. Scholar,
Department of Political Science,
The University of Burdwan,
Burdwan, West Bengal, India;

[3] Ph.D. Scholar,
Department of Political Science,
The University of Burdwan,
Burdwan, West Bengal, India

Corresponding Author:
Surya Kanta Datta

Abstract

The prevalence of Western theoretical paradigms in international relations (IR) has replaced many traditional non-Western approaches to strategic thinking. Kautilya's mandala theory, published in Arthashastra, was one of the first systematic explanations of how countries interact with each other. This article reevaluates the Mandala hypothesis in the context of current South Asian politics. It says that Kautilya's "concentric-circle model" can help us understand the India-China and India-Pakistan rivalries, as well as the hedging strategies of the smaller South Asian governments. In this model, close neighbours are natural enemies, and neighbours' neighbours are possible allies. The study ends with an evaluation of the applicability and constraints of Mandala logic in the twenty-first century, based on a survey of the literature, new policy documents from the Ministry of External Affairs, and qualitative textual analysis. Mandala theory doesn't take into account the economic interdependence, international organisations, and non-state actors that are at play, even though it is very similar to realist (especially realism) and balance-of-power frameworks. The report says that mandala is a basic but not enough way to look at how South Asia's strategic landscape has changed over time.

Introduction

International Relations (IR) has a deep intellectual history from the West, especially the realist view of IR. Hans Morgenthau (1948) suggested that classical realism says that international politics is a fight for power that is shaped by human nature and the interests of states. Kenneth Waltz (1979) started structural realism, which focuses on systemic anarchy and the distribution of capabilities. These two things then determine how states act. Both traditions place power struggle, survival, and equilibrium at the forefront of global politics. Long before these ideas became popular in Western universities, ancient Indian political thought had already created a complex strategic framework based on similar realist ideas. Kautilya wrote the Arthashastra during the Mauryan dynasty, around the 4th century BCE. It gives a complete picture of how to run a country and how countries should get along with each other. This article examines Mandala theory (Rajamandala), which asserts that global politics forms a "circle of states" centred around a sovereign monarch (vijigishu). The idea is that direct neighbours are always enemies (ari), while the neighbours of those neighbours are potential friends (mitra). This geographically constrained reasoning exemplifies an early manifestation of balance-of-power rationality, acknowledging that alliances and strategic pragmatism are not immutable and that power can be redistributed. Kautilya's paradigm, unlike normative or idealist frameworks, prioritises raison d'état, the enhancement of security, and flexible diplomacy, encompassing negotiation, deterrence, and clandestine operations. South Asia has always been, and still is, one of the most strategically unstable areas in the world. The ongoing rivalry between India and Pakistan, the rise of China as a major geopolitical and maritime power, and the hedging strategies used by smaller regional players like Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives show that competition and cooperation are still going on in the region. This is because of geographic proximity and changes in the balance of power. The Ministry of External Affairs' policy, which includes the "Neighbourhood First" initiative and more involvement in the Indo-Pacific, shows that strategic considerations based on proximity are still important. At the same time, institutional frameworks, such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), have not been able to resolve structural rivalries. This has led to bilateral and

strategic balancing agreements becoming the most common type of agreement. This article analyses Kautilya's Mandala Theory as a non-Western realist framework that clarifies modern interstate relations in South Asia. The new system is built around nuclear deterrence, economic interdependence, and multilateral governance, which is different from the old one. However, the basic rules of geopolitical competition, how alliances interact, and how to maximise power are still the same. In the context of realism, I analyse Mandala Theory as a notable contribution to the ongoing endeavours to pluralise and decolonise International Relations theories, while concurrently providing a historically-informed theoretical framework for understanding contemporary South Asian geopolitics.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis utilises Kautilya's Mandala Theory as a conceptual framework to elucidate strategic manoeuvres in contemporary South Asia. In the Arthashastra, Mandala Theory (Rajamandala) envisions interstate relations as a circular 'circle of states,' where regional proximity, relative power dynamics, and strategic preferences determine the patterns of competition and alliance (Kautilya, trans. Rangarajan, 1992). The core tenets of Mandala Theory—geopolitical proximity, alliance fluidity, power maximisation, and strategic pragmatism—continue to possess substantial explanatory relevance for current geopolitical dynamics in the region, notwithstanding its origins in a pre-modern context. The Mandala Theory asserts that adjacent entities are competitors and inherent adversaries (ari), with their geographical closeness fostering rivalry within the existing paradigm (Kautilya, trans. Rangarajan, 1992). Recent trends in South Asian regional security may make this focus on geographic proximity seem normal. India and Pakistan's rivalry is probably the longest-lasting in the world. Besides historical grievances, the territorial conflict over Kashmir, cross-border militant operations, and ongoing military confrontations exemplify how our geographical proximity sustains insecurity (Ganguli, 2001; Paul, 2005). Both capitals are still militarising the front lines along the Line of Control, which shows that they are competing with each other because they are close to each other, even after the Balakot strikes in 2019 and the tensions that followed. Likewise, the ongoing border disputes between India and China in eastern Ladakh (since 2020) demonstrate how shared borders can effectively escalate strategic rivalry into direct conflict. The lack of a clear border regime and the militarisation on both sides suggest structural competitive dynamics similar to Mandala logic (Pant & Shankar, 2021). Even now, when air power, missiles, and remote deterrence are the norm, geography still affects how people see threats and what strategic actions they take. Mandala Theory posits that coalitions are not static but rather dependent on the evolution of strategic objectives (Kautilya, trans. Rangarajan, 1992). This adaptability is evident in modern South Asian countries. Pakistan's partnership with China is a good example of the saying, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and improved defence cooperation have become key parts of Islamabad's foreign policy, helping to counter India's regional power (Wolf, 2020). On the other hand, India's partnerships with the US, Japan, Australia, and the QUAD show that it is balancing its power with other countries, which can lessen China's influence. Smaller South Asian countries also use strategic hedging. Bangladesh has strong economic ties with China, works more closely with India on defence, and takes part in Western military exercises (Chakraborty, 2021). Due to changes in the political situation in Sri Lanka, the country is moving its investments from Chinese infrastructure to working with Indian security (Herath, 2021). This is in line with Kautilya's idea of "dynamic alliances," where groups that are competing with each other form coalitions based on their relative preferences instead of long-term commitments. According to the Mandala Theory, countries shouldn't try to get power to avoid pain; instead, they should focus on survival, which is similar to how strategic contests work today (Kautilya, trans. Rangarajan, 1992). This need is also emphasised by classical and structural realism (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979), but its modern form in South Asia is shaped by specific regional forces. The nuclearisation of India and Pakistan has fundamentally transformed the strategic landscape. Nuclear weapons have improved the stability of deterrence, but they have not replaced traditional competition or geopolitical rivalry (Sagan & Waltz, 1995; Tellis, 2001). Instead, they have sparked the growth of capabilities and strategic signalling. India's "Act East" and Indo-Pacific plans, which focus on working together at sea and improving military capabilities outside of the subcontinent, are examples of how to maximise power in the modern world. India's plans to work with other countries on naval operations in the Indian Ocean and strengthen its military presence in Southeast Asia fit with the balance of power in relation to China (Brewster, 2019). At the same time, Pakistan's investments in missiles and regular troops, along with Chinese military support, fit with the established path of capacity-building logic. To protect themselves from the unknown, smaller governments selectively improve their abilities, for example, by building coastal security infrastructure, holding multilateral exercises, or buying a variety of defence goods. Mandala Theory's sixth principle of foreign policy, dual policy (dvaidhibhava), calls for a strategic approach that combines diplomacy with secret actions when necessary (Kautilya, trans. Rangarajan, 1992). This viewpoint corresponds with contemporary South Asian conduct. India and Pakistan consistently engage in diplomatic initiatives despite ongoing hostility, encompassing backchannel negotiations and intermittent ceasefire agreements along the Line of Control (Pant, 2020). In the disputed area of Kashmir and along the border between China and India, strategic rivalry is marked by secret operations, intelligence work, and proxy wars. Using drones, cyber operations, and targeted signalling is a mix of diplomacy and measured force. India's "Neighbourhood First" strategy and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), are important diplomatic moves that both countries are making to gain power in South Asia (Kumar, 2020; Wolf, 2020). Both are trying to get a strategic edge by working on infrastructure and economic projects in the middle of the changing dynamics of their alliances. Mandala Theory offers a comprehensive theoretical framework for assessing current strategic dynamics in South Asia, focusing on geographical proximity, alliance development, power shifts, and strategic pragmatism. Even though the region is changing because of nuclearisation, globalisation, and the growth of institutions, Kautilya's structural logic is still useful for studying rivalries,

balancing, and hedging behaviours in one of the most complicated geopolitical areas in the world. This article analyses Mandala theory as an antecedent expression of balance of power principles in the framework of territorial alignment.

Literature Review

The increasing academic emphasis on non-Western international relations theory has enabled a reassessment of classical Indian strategic thought, exemplified by Kautilya's Arthashastra. The philological and conceptual theoretical contributions stemmed from the seminal works of R. P. Kangle (1969) and L. N. Rangarajan (1992), which were instrumental in the establishment of Mandala Theory as a coherent philosophy of interstate relations. The researchers said that Kautilya's Rajamandala is a very detailed theory of power politics that takes into account geography, different types of alliances, and strategic thinking. Political theorists, such as Roger Boesche (2002), have observed that Kautilya foresaw fundamental aspects of realism, including raison d'état, intelligence gathering, and coercive diplomacy. Another group of strategic studies has put Mandala Theory in the larger realist tradition by linking it to the works of Hans Morgenthau (1948) and Kenneth Waltz (1979). Morgenthau links competition for power to human nature, while Waltz links efforts to balance to systemic anarchy. Kautilya, on the other hand, focuses on spatial proximity and material capabilities as factors that lead to competition (Boesche, 2002; Waltz, 1979). The Mandala model has been used to look at the rivalry between India and Pakistan and China's growing power in South Asia. Researchers like Sumit Ganguly (2001) and T. V. Paul (2005) show how territorial disputes, nuclear deterrence, and a lack of trust between India and Pakistan make them "natural enemies," which is what Mandala calls them. Recent studies (C. Raja Mohan, 2018; Harsh V. Pant, 2016) demonstrate how China's increasing involvement via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) disturbs current regional alignments, embodying the tenets of external balancing. The analysis of smaller South Asian countries validates Mandala's notion of a dynamic alliance. Due to the rivalry between India and China, countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh use hedging strategies to protect their independence (Amitav Acharya, 2008; David Brewster, 2019). This corresponds with Kautilya's concept of dvaidhibhava (dual strategy), which posits that states pursue both cooperation and competition to achieve strategic dominance (Rangarajan, 1992). Critics, on the other hand, warn that Mandala Theory may need to be changed to fit modern times. The nuclearisation of South Asia (Sagan & Waltz, 1995; Tellis, 2001), economic globalisation, and regional organisations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) are significant factors that did not exist in Kautilya's era. Mandala fits with realist and balance-of-power theories, but recent research says that it needs to be added to with structural and institutional frameworks to be truly rigorous.

Research Methodology

This research employs qualitative and interpretative methodologies to analyse the theoretical underpinnings of Kautilya's Mandala Theory and its applicability to the contemporary strategic context of South Asia. A qualitative approach is most suitable for elucidating the intellectual profundity and contextual subtleties of the primary source material, taking into account its philosophical and historical aspects. The research is based on a comprehensive textual analysis of the Arthashastra, authored by Kautilya. Utilising authoritative translations (by R. Shamasastry and L. N. Rangarajan) to maintain the credibility of the textual source and uphold academic integrity. A hermeneutical approach is utilised to analyse concepts such as Rajamandala (circle of states), classifications of rulers (ari, mitra, madhyama, udasina), and a summary of six foreign policy strategies (shadgunya). The study clarifies the strategic rationale of these elements, particularly concerning geographical proximity, alliance formation, power dynamics, and realpolitik. These classical concepts are further examined in relation to contemporary realism and balance of power theories to discern conceptual similarities and differences. To prevent anachronistic interpretation, Mandala Theory is contextualised within the political and historical framework of the Mauryan era, marked by territorial consolidation and inter-kingdom rivalry. We use secondary academic sources to look at this situation in a new way: The authors analyse the comparative differences between the two regimes regarding governance philosophies and investigate the literature on structural analogies in modern South Asia. We also look at official papers and yearly reports from the Ministry of External Affairs to connect theoretical ideas with how strategic discourse is now. The triangulation of primary sources, academic scholarship, and policy documents bolsters the analytical rigour and methodological integrity of the research.

Kautilya's Mandala Theory and the Current Strategic Context of South Asia: From a South Asian Point of View

Kautilya, an Indian political philosopher also referred to as Chanakya, established a framework for the contemplation and examination of interstate relations in his book, Arthashastra. Central to his work is the Mandala Theory (Rajamandala), which offers a framework for analysing the dynamic interactions of states within a competitive geographical setting. This thesis, originating in the 4th century BCE, is remarkably relevant when applied to the strategic environment of contemporary South Asia.

The Mandala Logic and Geopolitics of South Asia

Kautilya's Mandala Theory describes the political world as a circle of states around a central figure (the vijigishu, or would-be conqueror). Geography, power, and strategic interests (Kautilya) decide where each state fits into this circle. A state's neighbours are its natural enemies (ari) and natural friends (mitra) (Kangle, 1969). These ideas are very relevant right now because of the ongoing rivalry between India and Pakistan, which has been a big part of South Asian geopolitics since India was split into two countries in 1947. The ongoing political and territorial disputes between India and Pakistan exemplify what the Mandala designates as "immediate neighbours as natural adversaries" (Boesche, 2002)—especially in relation to Kashmir. Pakistan's

alliance with China, which is India's main enemy in the area, shows Kautilya's saying that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." The China-Pakistan alliance has grown stronger in both military and economic ways since the 1960s. It has helped keep India's power in the region in check (Acharya, 2008). China's growth in this area, especially through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), directly threatens India's strategic interests.

India as the Vijigishu

The vijigishu, the main character in Kautilya's Mandala, has power and influence. India is a key player in South Asia because of its size, strong economy, and military power. India's position as a regional power has affected its foreign policy, which often puts more emphasis on the power of smaller states than on larger ones, as well as on the threats posed by rival countries like China and Pakistan. India's "Neighbourhood First" strategy aims to improve ties with nearby countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan. This is in line with the Mandala idea that a country must have an impact on its neighbours to avoid being surrounded (Pant, 2016). But there is resistance to India's dominance. Smaller governments in the region want to keep an eye on China to protect their independence and political power. The Mandala Theory framework explains how India and its smaller neighbours work together and against each other. Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, among other countries with rich and diverse historical and cultural ties, have tried to improve their ties with China to balance India's power. The trend corresponds with Kautilya's view that governments, in these situations, strive to create temporary coalitions driven by convenience and strategic imperatives (Boesche 2002).

The Role of China: The Extended Mandala

China is not located in South Asia, but its influence has changed the balance of power in the region. China is getting more involved with South Asian countries through economic and infrastructure projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This is causing problems within the traditional Mandala framework. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) connects Gwadar port in Pakistan to Xinjiang province in China. This is an example of how China is trying to strengthen its strategic presence in the area. China is expanding its influence in South Asia, making Pakistan its main ally and trying to build relationships with smaller countries in the area, such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh (Mohan, 2018). From the Mandala point of view, China is seen as an outer-circle actor that affects the power dynamics in South Asia's inner circle. India is becoming more worried about China's strategic goals in the Indian Ocean, and it is taking steps to limit China's growing power by strengthening ties with countries like the US, Japan, and Australia through the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) (Pant, 2016).

Smaller States and Strategic Autonomy

What we can learn from smaller states and strategic autonomy: The governments of Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, as small Asian countries, try to keep their power by finding a balance between India, China, and other regional or global powers, rather than siding with a major strategic player. This strategy is similar to Kautilya's (1992) idea of dvaidhibhava (dual policy), in which poorer countries use a balancing strategy by putting opposing powers against each other. After that, Nepal has tried to improve its ties with China, even though there were tensions when the Belt and Road Agreements were signed in 2017. Sri Lanka has used its ties with India and China to its advantage to get the most out of its economic and political interests, especially when it comes to expanding ports (Acharya, 2008). Bangladesh's foreign relations also show that it is trying to find a balance. Bangladesh has built strong trade and security ties with India while also building a stronger economic relationship with China. This method of balancing stops small states from becoming too dependent on a powerful state, which gives them more freedom and strategic options.

Nuclearization and Strategic Stability

Nuclear Weapons and the Long Road to Strategic Balance: The most important difference between Kautilya's time and South Asia today is that nuclear weapons are now present. The nuclear capabilities of India and Pakistan have transformed their rivalry into a practice of deterrence and a balance of power. In Kautilya's time, the reasons for war and conquest were to gain power and expand territory. In contrast, the current nuclear landscape embodies a strategic paradox: the deterrent efficacy of nuclear armaments inhibits total warfare, while concurrently exacerbating rivalries via proxy conflicts, military impasses, and diplomatic manoeuvres (Khurshid, 2019). The nuclear deterrent significantly transforms Mandala dynamics. The nuclear landscape of South Asia can be examined through the lens of deterrence, given that Kautilya's philosophy predominantly emphasised warfare as a means to achieve security. Both alliances and rivalries are logical ideas. Even though India and Pakistan have spent a lot of money on their nuclear weapons, they fight each other indirectly through cyber warfare, terrorism, and diplomatic pressure.

Regional Institutions

The establishment of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985 was an initiative to formalise collaboration within the area. However, the organization has largely been ineffective in addressing the escalating India-Pakistan tensions and in resolving fundamental concerns such as Kashmir. Kautilya's Mandala Theory posits that regional cooperation may be challenging to achieve when dominant countries harbour enduring rivalries. The inability of SAARC to address regional conflicts exemplifies the Mandala approach, which posits that coalitions formed under pressure and convenience are fundamentally fragile and prone to disruption (Pant, 2016).

The Indian Ocean Dimension

China's strategic rivalry in South Asia has expanded to the Indian Ocean, influencing the regional dynamics. China's ongoing naval buildup in the Indian Ocean and its investments in maritime infrastructure in countries like Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Pakistan have forced India to strengthen its naval capabilities and build stronger ties with other Indo-Pacific nations (Mohan, 2018). This maritime extension adds a whole new level to the regional Mandala. Controlling sea routes and getting to ports is now just as important as fighting over land. Kautilya's Mandala Theory is a useful way to think about how strategic dynamics are changing in South Asia today. Mandala logic can be seen in the rivalry between India and Pakistan, China's rise as a major regional power, the ways that smaller states keep the balance, and the region's nuclear deterrence. The mechanisms of interstate competition are evolving and are influenced by contemporary factors — nuclear deterrence, economic globalisation, and international law — however, the fundamental concepts of rivalry, alliance, and strategic calculation articulated by Kautilya continue to inform South Asian geopolitics. The Mandala Theory provides a modern lens for understanding the complexities of the strategic environment in South Asia, as well as how specific states in the region navigate a turbulent geopolitical landscape marked by competing interests.

Conclusion

This analysis examined Kautilya's Mandala Theory as a classical realism framework to clarify the present strategic contexts of South Asia. The Mandala paradigm, based on Kautilya's Arthashastra, sees interactions between states as a complex "circle of states" that is affected by things like geography, relative power, and strategic goals. Mandala Theory provides a historical and pragmatic framework for understanding the present geopolitical situation in South Asia, based on the intrinsic rivalry among interconnected states, the volatility of alliances, the quest for increased power, and the necessity of pragmatic diplomacy. The ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan is an example of Kautilya's idea that neighbouring groups often become hostile, especially when there are long-standing disputes over land and history. China's growing strategic influence in South Asia— through infrastructure projects, maritime involvement, and stronger security cooperation with Pakistan—shows how outside forces are trying to balance things out, which is in line with the Mandala theory that says "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." Additionally, smaller regional governments, including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives, participate in hedging to increase their autonomy, demonstrating the adjunctuality of alliances, which Kautilya deems essential for strategic adaptation. These observations suggest that even though the system has changed a lot and in a lot of places, the political behaviours in the region are still based on the structural logic of proximity-driven competitiveness and strategic calculation. Still, there are big differences between the world of the twenty-first century and the classical geopolitical arena where Mandala Theory came from. The presence of nuclear weapons has fundamentally transformed the considerations of war and peace, including deterrence stability and the dynamics of constrained conflict (Sagan & Waltz, 1995). The idea of territorial power is made more complicated by global economic ties, technical interdependence, and supply chains that cross national borders. Additionally, multilateral organisations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), notwithstanding their deficiencies, embody substantial initiatives to transcend zero-sum competition. Non-state actors, cyber capabilities, and global governance regimes broaden the strategic landscape beyond the state-centric principles of conventional Mandala thought. Because of this, Mandala Theory can't be used as a set way to look at modern policy. It is a basic way of looking at things that includes long-lasting ideas about competition, balance, and practical statecraft. When used with structural realism and modern regional security frameworks, it adds to theoretical pluralism and makes the diversity of International Relations scholarship even greater. Reevaluating the situation at Kautilya in the context of current geopolitical changes improves our comprehension of the changing strategic environment in South Asia and highlights the importance of integrating non-Western intellectual traditions into global international relations discussions.

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