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Beyond Eurocentrism: Kautilya's realism and India's regional diplomacy

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The article is a modest attempt to deparochialize Eurocentrism embedded within the discipline of International Relations by examining Kautilya and his Arthashastra. Kautilya's text serves as a potent non-Western theoretical and conceptual reservoir to engage with and thereby to interrogate the Eurocentric realist tradition. The subject matter of Arthashastra precisely earns him the title of 'first great political realist' because much of the bedrock assumptions of realism that Europe came to know very late, Kautilya had in ancient India grasped them. Therefore, his Arthashastran realism offers an indigenous theoretical toolkit to examine India's strategic culture. In fact, Kautilya's realism is there in the DNA of India's strategic culture and has been the default strategy for South Asia as India still perceives the region through the historical sub-continental prism. Nevertheless, its application varied across leadership. However, the rise of Modi had revitalized the dynamic of Arthashastra by openly and boldly embracing Kautilya as vividly underscored by his 'Neighborhood First' diplomacy in South Asia. Thus Kautilya apart from being a non-Western begetter of the realist tradition offers a reliable understanding of India's regional diplomacy in the subcontinent.

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Introduction

International Relations (IR) especially with the post-positivist turn has been subjected to serious scholarly discontent for being a parochial discipline. For the dissident scholarship ever since its beginning as a discipline, IR has reproduced itself by either silencing or confiscating knowledge production at the margins of the 'self', that is, by articulating and re-articulating the coloniality of knowledge (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo (2011)). John Hobson even traces back this process to the mid-18th century and argues, thereafter the international theory that developed both inside and outside of the discipline has mostly been a Eurocentric construct. For him, in a very precise manner, the international theory essentially constructs a series of Eurocentric conceptions of world politics (Hobson, 2012, p. 1). In this way, the notion of Eurocentrism does not simply refer to a geographical question but articulates a much deeper one—the epistemic question. Eurocentrism as a knowledge system gets re-articulated through the spatio-temporal binaries by locating 'Europe' as a space separate from the 'non-West' and always ahead within the story of the progressive narrative of the international. This is a deliberately designed choreography to explicitly and implicitly place Europe as the origin and originator of all developments, which are considered to be central to the development of international relations. The subsequent knowledge system develops into intellectual colonialism or the coloniality of knowledge which post-colonial thinkers define as an 'epistemic violence committed at the 'encounter' with the 'other' and leading to what Boaventura de Sousa Santos refers to as 'epistemicide' (Fonseca, 2019, p. 3). So instead of elucidating international politics in an objective, positivist, and universalist manner, international relations theory rather celebrates and promotes the West parochially as the highest or ideal normative referent in world politics. Being the dominant theory of the discipline, Realism is quintessential a Eurocentric theory as international politics is conflated with the politics of intra-Western relations so much so that reference to the non-Western world is all but absent. According to Hobson, the focus of realism is what he calls the "Westphalian big bang" of 1648, which assumes that the international system exploded in Europe as the result of the peace of Westphalia (Hobson, 2012, p. 190). The 'Westphalian Myth' as labeled by Andreas Osiander, linking the emergence of the Westphalian model to the Peace of Westphalia is largely based on the 19th and 20th-century fixation on the concept of state sovereignty. Consequently, the IR theory in general and the dominant realist paradigm in particular argues Osiander, developed against the background of the ideology of sovereignty (Osiander, 2001). In this way Eurocentrism underpins both classical, as well as neo-realism given their normative and explanatory framework being grounded within a parochial analysis of West wherein intra-Western politics is presented as world politics. Back in 1977, Professor Stanely Hoffman had stigmatized IR as an American Social Science as he famously put it, 'the discipline of international relations was born and raised in America which had profound consequences for thinking and theorizing' (Hoffman, 1977, p. 59). The master variables of Kenneth Waltz and Mearsheimer's theories are all derived from European and American experiences and not from the analysis of interstate relations elsewhere. To expose and therefore defeat this parochial bias of the discipline, there has emerged a plethora of scholarly works approaching narratives and theorization beyond the West. As Ersel Aydinli and Gonca Biltekin in one such latest work argue that there is increasing desirability within the discipline of IR which reflects a consensus on the need for encouraging homegrown theorization to overcome the global hegemonic structure of the discipline which had pushed the periphery scholars to be just consumers of theory rather than

producers of it (Aydinli and Biltekin, 2018, p. 16). Therefore, to enrich the theoretical horizon of the discipline, as well as simultaneously to defeat the Eurocentrism, non-Western perspectives apart from interrogating the geographical aspect must problematize the epistemic primacy of Europe. In this respect, the historical turn constitutes an important critique that opens researchers' curiosities to search for (or create) 'different' narratives, draw on concepts that were left at the margins, and prioritize the work of authors outside of the canon. This article is one of the modest attempts in that direction to move beyond the Euro-centric theorization and in particular, deparochialize the realist theory. The potent intellectual tool will be the ancient Indian realist, Kautilya, and his classic text *Arthashastra*. Being a non-Western, Kautilya is in fact the first great political realist and his text's subject matter underscores his place in the otherwise Euro-centric realist tradition. He had addressed those timeless questions that would much later in modern times become the bedrock assumptions of realism as a mainstream theory. The second task of the article is to examine the regional diplomacy of post-independent India in South Asia via Kautilyan realism. The main argument put forward is that Kautilya's *Arthashastra* as a reliable non-Western realistic classic offers an important theoretical and conceptual reservoir for contemporary scholars to engage with and also serves as a reliable theoretical toolkit to understand the strategic culture of India as an emerging great power. Finally, the article argues that even if Kautilya's realism has been the default strategy of India in South Asia nevertheless its execution varies across leadership and Modi has demonstrated the will and determination to embrace *Arthashastra* openly and very boldly. The article is divided into four sections; section first deals with Kautilyan realism, the second section provides an overview of India's regional diplomacy through a Kautilyan realistic analysis, section third examines Modi's embrace of Kautilya via his neighborhood first policy and the final section provides the concluding remarks.

Kautilya: ancient India's political realist

Kautilya also referred to as Chanakya and Vishnugupta was a remarkable realist who lived in ancient India. He is said to be had worked as a teacher in the famous ancient Indian university at Takshshila. During the time of Greek invasions especially led by Alexander the Great, he went to Nanda King Chaur Dana who was ruling Magadha, and pleaded for help to save India. Instead of listening to him, the Nanda king insulted him as being a priest, an ugly monkey who knew little about military affairs. The incident as reliable sources suggests left a deep mark in his life and instead of being trapped by an emotional collapse, he responded back with what would become a timeless classic, a genuine scholarly magnum opus, the *Arthashastra*. By virtue of his realistic masterpiece, the *Arthashastra* as a practical guide to action (Kissinger, 2014, p. 195), he would make a great king Chandragupta, a Kshatriya who was taken as a young boy by Kautilya to Taxila to educate him in science arts, and military strategy. With the pragmatic advice from the greatest military and political minds of ancient India, Chandragupta not only dislodged the Nanda dynasty but also stopped the Greek invaders and united India into the famous Mauryan Empire. The Mauryan Empire would become the largest than even the Mughal, as well as the British Empire (Wolpert, 2004, p. 59). The credit for uniting the country and carving such a mighty empire goes to Kautilya. Romila Thapar speaks of him as Bismarck, a chancellor to help Chandragupta to unify India into an empire (Thapar, 1978, p. 12).

The Arthashastra to which Kissinger refers as a ‘combination of Machiavelli and Clausewitz’ due to its emphasis on power, the dominant reality in politics was lost since the fall of the Gupta Empire and rediscovered in 1904 after almost more than 1400 years of obscurity. Moreover, the first published English translation came in 1915 followed by Russian, German, and others. Despite its importance as a classic of unsparing political realism, the Arthashastra is little known outside of India (Boesche, 2017, p. 7) and even within the domain of Indian IR; its author Kautilya is not recognized or owned as the father of realpolitik (Behera, Re-imagining (2009, p. 101). The text is indeed a masterpiece of statecraft, diplomacy, and strategy and above all represents a reliable example of non-Western literature on the dominant realist theory in Eurocentric IR. Still, the *Arthashastra* has either been ignored or ‘orientalized’ in the Western political science discourse. As Max Weber has commented: truly radical Machiavellianism in the popular sense of the word is clearly expressed in the ancient literature of Indian Arthashastra of Kautilya and compared to it Machiavelli’s *The Prince* is harmless’ (Weber 1978, p. 220). His labeling of Kautilya as ‘Indian Machiavelli’ lead to a chronological battle within the scholarship; since Kautilya’s text predates Hobbes ‘state of nature’, Machiavelli’s ‘*The Prince*’, Morgenthau’s ‘unchanging human nature’ and Waltz’s ‘anarchy’, the proponents of non-Western IR has voiced their discontent with the label of ‘Indian Machiavelli’ and not labeling Machiavelli as ‘Italian or Mediterranean Kautilya (Acharya, 2014). Consequently, fresh studies emerged relabeling Machiavelli as the ‘modern European avatar of Kautilya’ (de Souza, 2011). Roger Boesche had bluntly given him the title of ‘first great, unrelenting political realist’ (Boesche, 2017, p. 1). For him, as Weber saw, the Arthashastra frequently rendered as ‘science of politics’—that describes how a king should rule makes Machiavelli seem mild especially when one examines the issues of assassination, spies, and torture. The Arthashastra hardly considers any question as immoral and hence leaves its mark on every reader like a chill as when a dark cloud blocks a warm sun. For Boesche this is one of the reasons why Thucydides the chronologically plausible one is not but Kautilya is the first great political realist. Apart from writing history not a systematic political treatise to guide rulers, Thucydides couldn’t escape from the questions of morality and justice. Whilst for Kautilya the only yardstick to judge any political action is the consequences it had for the state and its people. So, the former would have experienced that frightful chill if he had come across the latter’s text (Ibid: 2–5). Therefore, India’s realist tradition is undoubtedly the oldest in the world and there is no question on Kautilya’s Arthashastra being the classic of that tradition. The text’s advocacy of the concept of a strong central administration, and substantive economic and political reforms lead Heinrich Zimmer to proclaim it the first complete anthology of the timeless laws of politics, economy, diplomacy, and war (Zimmer 2013, p. 36). The fundamental virtue of the text remains realpolitik, emphasizing the state’s self-interest and security by endorsing pragmatism and utility to justify state actions, above all else. It is the national interest that serves as the principal standard for shaping the foreign policy of a state. In fact, it is the sole motivating force behind states all actions, so only that action that serves better than others to promote the national interest of the state must be selected. Kautilya has famously stated that ‘the welfare of a state depends on an active foreign policy’ (Rangarajan, 1992, p. 505). To pursue an active foreign policy a state must be strong in all aspects; politically, economically, and militarily to minimize the possibility of an attack. In this way, he had certainly grasped the logic of balance of power (BOP) arguments even long before the phrase was actually known to the west. He had advocated the pursuance of a BOP policy via both self-help and

alliances (Gautam, 2013. Although there is a dispute among scholars as to whether his Mandala theory can be taken as an articulation of the modern version of BOP as a source of peace and stability (Boesche, 2017, p. 79), nevertheless his *sadgunya*¹ does strike a balance of power in international politics (Shamasastri, 1915, p. 365). The essence of Mandala theory is that a state must assume all its neighboring states as enemies and those states on the other side of these enemy states were likely to be allies, to put it differently, the often quoted dictum; the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Furthermore his ‘*matsya-nyaya*’ doctrine of ‘the stronger fish devouring the weaker’ corresponds to the ‘law of jungle’, ‘might is right’ or ‘anarchy’ in Western lexicon (Liebig, 2014, p. 5). Since international politics operate according to *matsya-nyaya*, moral principles or obligations have little or no force consequently every state according to Kautilya acts to maximize power and self-interest. Thus, Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* offers an important non-Western reservoir of ideas and concepts and as such demands theoretical engagement by contemporary scholars, as well as students alike to broaden the discipline of IR.

India’s regional diplomacy and Kautilya: an overview

India has from the outset viewed South Asia as its natural backyard reserved for its own influence and for that Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* offers possibly the first comprehensive study of a neighborhood policy and strategies for safeguarding the frontiers and national security (Ramaswamy, Tumkur, 1962). For him, the conquest of the *chakravarti-kshetram* (Indian subcontinent) was not mainly a matter of military action, but an expansion of the sovereignty or the dominion of the ruler “by effecting alliances with those who ... were likely to be won over” (Wink, 1984). Akin to Kautilya’s depiction, India looks at the subcontinent as a geopolitical unit, and being the largest and most powerful entity, its strategic compulsions are still defined by sub-continental concerns. It cannot insulate its security from developments within the neighboring states (Saran, 2017, pp. 16–17). So Michael Liebig accurately proclaims that Kautilya’s teachings from an essential part of India’s intellectual DNA and remain the key ingredient of its strategic culture (Liebig, 2013). The first prime minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru had studied Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* and by giving special treatment in his *Discovery of India*, he attested it as part of modern India’s politico-cultural narrative (Nehru, 1981, pp. 122–127). Accordingly, Nehru’s determination to keep out foreign powers from South Asia, which was considered to be its exclusive sphere of influence (Malone, 2011) has a Kautilyan base. His policy of non-alignment hailed as a realistic policy reflecting India’s geopolitical situation (Pant, 2019, p. 129) loudly echoes Kautilya’s advice of following self-interest instead of getting trapped into a permanent enmity or friendship with any other nation. In this way, Nehru intended to give India room to manoeuvre according to its own national self-interest, rather than entrenching in the limitations of the Cold War alliance. Nonetheless, the 1962 defeat by China exposed his inadequate grasp of Kautilya’s realpolitik. Subsequently, Indra Gandhi appeared to have a sound understanding of realpolitik than her father, and hence South Asia as India’s backyard for the first time attained centrality. Not only would India protect its security and strategic interests in the subcontinent but would also be sensitive to the events that had or could have an impact on India. Thus Indra Gandhi’s neighborhood doctrine came to be regarded as the South Asian version of America’s well known Monroe doctrine² (Hagerty, 1991). The integration of Sikkim and the occupation of Goa along with the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 as a masterstroke revealed her expertise in Kautilyan diplomacy. In addition, her embracing of the Soviet Union when the US and China

established a virtual alliance during the Bangladesh operation came to be regarded by Shyam Saran as a textbook case of the dynamics of Mandala theory. Hence during the 1971 war, by virtue of the Indo-Soviet Treaty of friendship, India successfully prevented China from intervening in support of Pakistan (Saran, 2017, pp. 40–41). The Indra doctrine continued until 1984 when Indra Gandhi was assassinated and succeeded by her son Rajiv Gandhi. India, however, under Rajiv Gandhi followed the same tune of realpolitik to resolve the conflict in Sri Lanka on its own terms and keep out other states.

Since the end of the Cold War, India has begun to apply more of the *Arthashastra's* maxims as its power grew; idealism was increasingly jettisoned and realism was embraced. With the growing confidence and ability, India realized the necessity of pursuing its own interests and began to vigorously assert South Asia as a zone of Indian pre-eminence. China, the geopolitical rival began to penetrate into South Asia as the smaller Indian 'jealous' and 'unfriendly' neighbors to use Kautilya's language opened the doors for it. These states also responded by devising SAARC as a mechanism to gang up against India (Sikri, 2009, p. 26). To deal with China, India began to pursue the Mandala dynamics as evidenced by the famous Look East Policy, officially announced by Prime Minister Narsima Rao in his Singapore visit in 1994. Herein, India had sought to cultivate strong relationships with China's local rivals in East Asia based on realpolitik. The essence of the 'Circle of States' got reflected as India began to look at the world through concentric circles. The first circle encompasses South Asia, the immediate neighborhood, the second covers the 'extended neighborhood' stretching across Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral, thereby implying the entire stretch of the Indo-Pacific; and the third, includes the entire global stage, with India being a key player at every stage. To win over the immediate neighborhood, I K Gujral announced the very famous non-reciprocal accommodative policy known as Gujral Doctrine (Sen Gupta, 1997, pp. 308–309). The doctrine does not only spell out India's generosity but also articulates the attitude which India would like its neighbors to espouse in conducting relations with India. What follows from this, which is unstated, is that India in its national interest may also not be able to adhere to its neighbors beyond a particular point whereby the neighbors do not adhere to these principles. To be sure, India cannot continue with non-reciprocity if any of the neighboring countries attempted either at internationalizing bilateral issues or supporting elements hostile to India's national interests. Apart from China, this certainly refers to Pakistan which was not included in the doctrine (Ganguly, 1997, pp. 126–135) and which perceived it as a means to isolate it. The NDA government led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee gave the country nuclear weapons and hence understood the realpolitik of avoiding war by preparing for it. It was during his tenure the then foreign minister Jaswant Singh popularized the notion of the extended neighborhood and since then has become woven by all the governments irrespective of party affiliation (Scott, 2009, p. 107). India also defeated Pakistan in the Kargil War forcing the infiltrators to retreat in 1999. The Cold-Start strategy to carry out quick yet low offensives against Pakistan was devised during this period. This strategy is based on untimely offensives by integrated battle groups (IBGs) taken out from the pivot corps positioned close to the international border with Pakistan. When the Pakistani forces would still be mobilizing, these Indian forces would carry out inconsequential offensives to gain a foothold (Scott, 2009, p. 163). Vajpayee's often quoted dictum 'friends can change but not neighbors' for Pakistan (The Economic Times, 2003) and simultaneously playing the Kautilyan way demonstrated his wisdom of knowing when to smile and when to be tough. Vajpayee pushed India into Central Asia to build a strategic space in the region, as well as to encircle Pakistan

(Central Asia Caucasus Analyst, 2004, p. 8) and China candidly illustrated Kautilya's theory of concentric circles (Cappelli, 2007, p. 67). During the period of Manmohan Singh, India's profile at the global level stood fundamentally augmented as a rising power. He stated the essence of *Arthashastra* by arguing that, 'whatever policy we may lay down, the art of conducting the foreign affairs of a country lies in finding out what is most advantageous to the country' (Baru, 2015). For him, India's economic rise would increase its regional, as well as global standing. Much like Kautilya, he emphasized the advancement of foreign policy in response to changing international circumstances as explicitly demonstrated by his signing the nuclear deal with the US. He also stressed neighborhood diplomacy by stating that, 'the real test of foreign policy is in the handling of neighbors' (Haran, 2017). To transform the neighborhood, his National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon, quoted a tale from *Arthashastra* in his speech at a conference organized by the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) Delhi in 2012. He acknowledged that the tale from Kautilya would help in building economic and other links while also attempting to resolve the political and security issues that divide us' (Bhasin, 2012, p. 804). In addition, with his special effort, serious studies on the text were carried out by the Institute of Defense Studies and Analyses (IDSA) since 2012. During his 8 October 2013 address to the institute he openly proclaimed that 'in many ways, the world which we face today... is similar to the world that Kautilya operated in when he built the Mauryan Empire to greatness' (Bhatia, 2016). Therefore from Nehru to Manmohan Singh, Kautilya and his *Arthashastra* has served as an unvarying strategic guide however subject to the execution capability of leadership.

Modi's neighborhood first and Kautilya: a warm embrace

Modi's emergence brought greater self-confidence in India. In a typically *Arthashastran* fashion, he followed a realistic foreign policy contrary to expectations and compared to his predecessors devoted much more energy to foreign affairs. He promoted India's economic and strategic interests during his visits to the greater and lesser powers equally to make India a leading power from just merely a balancing power (Pant, 2019). In fact, his romance with Kautilya got reflected even during his 2014 election campaign in which various themes from *Arthashastra* were used based on a 2010 book *Chankya Chant* by Ashwin Sanghi. His ambition of making India a great power is similar to Kautilyan *chakravartin* (the ideal, universal leader). On 31 October 2014, Modi launched the new 'Sardar Patel National Unity Day' which further demonstrated his enthusiasm for Kautilya as he unequivocally equated Patel with Kautilya by stating that, 'centuries ago Kautilya carried out a successful experiment of establishing a strong set up by uniting small princely states... the same great work has been done by the man whose birth anniversary we are celebrating today' (Misra, 2016, p. 342). South Asia assumed a key priority which became evident through his launching of the 'Neighborhood First' policy. According to Modi, "a nation's fate is connected to its neighborhood. That is why my government has prioritized enhancing friendship and cooperation with our neighbors". Indeed, he was quick to understand that for India, to become a key Asian power as well to become a credible global power depends exclusively on its ability to manage its immediate neighborhood (Chaturvedy, 2014, p. 90). For Sreeram Chaulia, 'even if Modi had not studied theories of statecraft, nevertheless he seemed trained to the age-old wisdom of converting neighbors to opportunities from challenges. There is an ingredient of realpolitik in his strategy of 'neighborhood first' which is alert and cautious of growing Chinese penetration in South Asia'. For Chaulia, Modi in fact revived the *Mandala* theory of Kautilya,

wherein India finds itself at the center of various concentric circles, the adjacent and most vital being immediate neighborhood (Chaulia, 2016, pp. 176–77). The inviting of all South Asian leaders to his swearing-in ceremony seemed an attempt to implement the ‘circle of kings’ strategy (Misra, 2016, p. 343). In addition, moving away from ideological rhetoric to real action, Modi along with his Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj made South Asia as a destination for their first foreign visits (Chaturvedy, 2014, pp. 90–91).

Bhutan became the first destination of Modi where he promised assistance with hydroelectric power projects; next became Nepal, which no Indian PM had visited in nearly two decades. He also broke records by signing a remarkable deal with Bangladesh to resolve the 70-year-old territorial issue and accordingly Dhaka provided a greater strategic opportunity to transform South Asia’s geopolitical situation. For India’s sub-regional initiatives like the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN), Bangladesh has emerged as a key doorway. So Bangladesh argued S. Jaishankar, the foreign secretary has become the ‘real accomplishments of the neighborhood first’ (Kaura, 2018). Sri Lanka which has chosen to get intimate with China under the Rajapaksa government became the next target of Modi’s neighborhood first to regain the lost ground under the new President Maithripala Sirisena (Pal, 2016). As expected Sirisena paid an official visit to India in February 2015, Modi also responded to set the record of becoming the first PM in the last 28 years to pay an individual visit to Sri Lanka. Besides addressing the Sri Lankan parliament he also visited the northern province of Jaffna. Modi in his second visit in 2017 visited the Tamil community in Sri Lanka and also inaugurated a specialty hospital built with Indian assistance. India also invested in the Mattala airport in the Hambantota district and in 2018 Sri Lanka agreed to operate it as a Sri Lanka-India joint venture (The Hindu, July 6, 2018) definitely welcome news for New Delhi to keep an eye on Beijing’s growing presence in Sri Lanka.

As a breakthrough PM, Modi also attempted to write a new chapter in the troubled India-Pakistan relationship by paying a surprise visit to Pakistan on his way back from Kabul to meet Nawaz Sharif (Pande, 2017, p. 90). The brief engagement characterized by ‘Sari-Shaw’ and ‘cricket diplomacy’ ended in January 2016 when the terrorists attacked a military base at Pathankot, near the Pakistan border. The subsequent Uri attack in September 2016 by Pakistan-based terrorists resulted in Modi’s pronouncement to break off talks with Pakistan (Pande, 2017, p. 90). In response India claimed to have conducted surgical strikes across the Line of Control in Pakistan on 29 September 2016 articulated the demonstration of *Gudayuddha*³. Modi further practiced the Kautilyan tale of ‘plunging the finger in the cooler fringes instead of the center of a hot dish’ by continuing the momentum of ‘neighborhood first’ policy beyond Pakistan. He introduced new concepts of ‘SAARC minus one’ (i.e., without Pakistan), and initiated a new trade block called BBIN (Bangladesh Bhutan India and Nepal) to pursue the neighborhood policy by sidestepping Pakistan being the obstinate SAARC member. The BBIN pact argues Chaulia is an Indian version of China’s ‘One Belt, One Road’ (OBOR) initiative, though on a smaller scale (Chaulia, 2016, p. 100). India’s isolation, as well as the direct involvement via surgical strikes and the Balakot airstrikes against the alleged Pulwama attack, revealed Modi’s employing of the *Danda* to alter the course of Pakistan’s actions. Apart from the overt aggressive posture towards Pakistan, Modi has effectively displayed the capability to invoke the Kautilyan Mandala theory or more specifically the policy of *Dvaidhibhava*⁴ by investing in Afghanistan and Iran, successfully joining the SCO, engaging UAE and embracing Saudi Arabia while also moving very closer to Israel.

As far as Afghanistan is concerned, Modi’s neighborhood diplomacy relatively has been a case of a success story. Afghanistan has witnessed regular high-level visits from India and vice versa. Apart from helping in constructing Afghanistan’s Parliament building and Salma Dam, both were inaugurated by Modi, India’s developmental aid to Afghanistan exceeds \$3 billion to remain the largest donor in the region (Times of India, January 4, 2019). The Kautilyan realism can further be deciphered from India’s recent outreach to the Taliban keeping in view the regional security implications as US President Joe Biden announced the complete withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan completely. According to strategic expert Michael Kugelman, ‘New Delhi’s outreaching to Taliban represents a significant shift because it is going from a non-existent relationship to the beginning of some kind of communication channel’ (Vaid, 2021). This is a very pragmatic move from India given its huge security stakes in Afghanistan and it makes no sense to cede the space for arch-rivals like Pakistan and China and hence in order to preserve its stakes, New Delhi must be talking to everyone including the Taliban.

Modi has also sought to put a new life in the extended neighborhood concept aiming at China’s expansionist mindset by replacing the Look East policy with his more robust version of the ‘Act East’ mantra in November 2014. Modi’s shift from ‘looking’ to ‘acting’ is a message that India is becoming increasingly willing to play a more active and prominent strategic role in East and southeast Asia (Rajendram, 2014, pp. 2–3). Modi is looking at India as the Kautilyan *Vijigishu* (one who desires victory) and the growing confidence has allowed him to pursue a reverse string of pearls strategy by establishing closer economic and defense engagements with Vietnam, Japan, Australia, and other East Asian states to contain, as well as have a chilling effect on China’s global ambitions (Srinivasan, 2014). The growing India-ASEAN synergy since the coming of Modi can also be gauged from the presence of 10 ASEAN leaders as chief guests on India’s Republic Day celebrations on January 26, 2018 (Chansoria, 2018, p. 2). In addition, the Mod Quad (Modi Quad) of India with the US, Japan, and Australia is the geopolitical expression of Arthashastra ‘circle of states’ as well as the *Dvaidhibhava* arrangement for Indo-Pacific to bring vaulting China to its heel. Furthermore, following the recent deadly Galwan clashes, Prime Minister Modi straightforwardly following the Kautilyan advice while confronting a more powerful neighbor who chose to stay quiet. If making peace with the enemy when one’s position is weaker than the enemy is what characterized Modi’s approach towards China, the same Arthashastra wisdom can be applied to decipher the rationale for reaching out to Pakistan after the clashes with China. Therefore Modi once again embraced the dual policy; managing China by not escalating the clashes beyond, as well as making peace with Pakistan to divert much energy and attention towards the former being the bigger enemy. Thus it would hardly be an overstatement to proclaim that Kautilya’s diplomacy got rejuvenated under Modi, very vividly articulated vis-a-vis Pakistan and China.

Conclusion

The article examined Kautilya as a political realist and his influence on contemporary India’s regional diplomacy in South Asia. Being disavowed in the scholarship of his own country, as well as orientalized in the West, Kautilya however is the doyen of the well-established tradition of realism in the discipline of IR. His magnum opus, the *Arthashastra* is a remarkable non-European realistic classic which serves as a very powerful analytical tool to deparochialize the Euro-centric discipline of IR in general and the realistic theory in particular. Kautilya’s realism

can be gauged from the establishment of the Mauryan Empire to unify the whole subcontinent and beyond. With his practical advice, Chandragupta was able to establish a mighty empire larger than the Mughal and British empires. The subject matter of *Arthashastra* where hardly any issue is considered immoral certainly surpasses the chronologically worthy competitor Thucydides and earns him the title of 'first great political realist'. Kautilya had discussed the core ideas and concepts of realism long before West came to know them. The primacy of national interest, foreign policy, war, as well as among others the balance of power dynamics through alliances and self-help and the anarchic nature of international politics makes his text an untapped conceptual and theoretical toolkit, contemporary scholars must engage with. Even if he is not acknowledged as the father of the realist tradition in the Indian scholarship, nevertheless his ideas and strategies constitute the DNA of contemporary India's foreign and security policies. His influence is much more visible in India's neighborhood diplomacy as India still looks at the region from the traditional sub-continental perspective. Echoing Kautilya, India considers South Asia as its exclusive sphere of influence and strives to be the dominant power in the region. From Nehru to Man Mohan Singh as the article argued Kautilya and his *Arthashastra* remained the default strategy for South Asia; however the execution depended very much on state capability and willingness from leadership. Even though Nehru followed *realpolitik* but his mishandling of China proved his inadequate grasp of Kautilya than her daughter Indra Gandhi. She seemed to be very well acquainted with *Arthashastran* diplomatic skills and effectively played the dynamic of Mandala by carving out Bangladesh and establishing an alliance with the Soviet Union.

With the end of the Cold War and growing self-confidence in India, South Asia assumed much more prominence with Kautilya's diplomacy being applied gallantly. The Chinese growing influence within the region became a serious priority to ward off. From Gujral Doctrine to Look East, as well as the extended neighborhood concept by invoking the notion of 'concentric circles' post-Cold-War leadership continued the Kautilyan strategic heritage followed by Nehru and Indra. Even if Kautilya's ideas have remained the holy grail of India's regional diplomacy, nevertheless there has been a kind of diffidence from hitherto leadership except for Indra Gandhi which in part can be attributed to India's lacking sufficient power potential to apply Kautilya more explicitly. However, with the emergence of Modi, India's regional, as well as global standing had improved a lot. He further elevated India's self-confidence as a great power and demonstrated willingness and ability to assertively invoke the *Arthashastran* diplomatic skills. Contrary to the suppositions, he devoted much energy to foreign policy and seemed familiar with the realistic diplomacy of Kautilya. He quickly grasped China's increasing forays in South Asia, as well as understood the importance of the backyard, he came up with his 'neighborhood first' policy mantra. Putting *Arthashastra* into action he played the dual policy of winning over the lost ground and simultaneously offsetting China's penetration in the region. This is in consonance with *Arthashastran* wisdom that to counter the growing influence of Beijing, New Delhi must reinvent its relationship with its small neighbors and as such must continue its realism-driven geopolitical pragmatism derived from the dual policy of Kautilyan *Dvaidhibhava*. For Pakistan, however being the smaller enemy as per Kautilyan wisdom, Modi had pursued an aggressive posture by claiming to conduct surgical strikes, as well as Balakot airstrikes. He assertively played the *Danda* option along with *Dvaidhibhava* in the case of Pakistan and Rajamandala more specifically in the case of China. For the former, he embraced Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran, and Afghanistan, etc. and for

the later the more robust 'Act East', as well as the 'Mod Quad' loudly echoes the sound of Kautilyan maxim 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'. Thus India has done a lot of groundwork to keep South Asia as its natural sphere of preeminence in a typical *Arthashastra* fashion; nevertheless, the regional states continue to play the China card because of the Mandala dynamic of perceived insecurity from neighboring India. However, this in no way should suggest India to back off in extending its benevolence towards the smaller neighbors that are very realistic; after all the road to becoming the *chakravartin* passes through South Asia being the immediate neighborhood. Along with Kautilyan interpretation of India's approach towards China, there is further scope for exploring the latter's way of handling the former, and in that the best available indigenous theoretical toolkit would be Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. This is a very promising research agenda given the similar recurring themes about restraint and moderation, as well as a balanced attitude to the use of force is to be found in both these texts, nevertheless, there are clear divergences when it comes to methodologies to be employed. The divergences will not only help in understanding the behavior of India-China towards each other as Asian neighbors from a homegrown theorization but will also broaden the realistic paradigm by incorporating in it the contributions from non-West especially from Asia and therefore would free the discipline's dominant theoretical paradigm from the clutches of eurocentrism.

Data availability

The author declares that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and have been properly cited. However, no separate datasets were generated or analyzed for this article.

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Notes

- 1 Refers to the six-fold foreign policy advocated by Kautilya as *Samdhi, Vighraha, Asana, Yana, Samsraya* and *Dvaidhibhava*
- 2 Stated by President James Monroe, the doctrine was a U.S policy from 1823 aimed at opposing European colonialism and the meddling by European nations in North and South America would be considered inimical.
- 3 One of the four kinds of War Kautilya talks about, it means a clandestine war fought by using covert methods to achieve the objective without actually waging a battle.
- 4 Refers to the policy of making peace with a state so that to pursue the policy of hostility towards another.

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Additional information

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