



Chanakya's mandala theory: An ancient realist framework for modern international relations

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Abstract

This paper discusses the Mandala Theory by Chanakya as mentioned in the Arthashastra, and its applicability in the modern world of International Relations as an ancient realist theory. The theory is credited to Chanakya (Kautilya), and it conceives interstate politics as a circle of states where close neighbors are possible enemies, and more distant state powers are natural allies. This paper counters that the fundamental ideas of the Mandala Theory, which are power maximization, national interest, strategic alliances, and primacy of security, are close to the way realists think in the present. The paper reproduces a comparison between its principles and current geopolitical practices, especially in the multipolar environment, and this proves that this theory has an enduring analytical use. Simultaneously, it recognizes the contextual constraints posed by dissimilarities amidst the antique regional political entities as compared to the current international system that is globalized. The paper finally discusses the Mandala Theory as one of the important non-Western contributions to the IR theory and strategic studies.

Keywords: Arthashastra, mandala theory, realism (international relations)

Introduction

The history of Western experience, philosophical tradition, and geopolitical reality has largely influenced the development of the academic discipline of International Relations (IR). Theories like Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism are based on the intellectual history of Europeans and have been shaped by occurrences like the Peace of Westphalia, the World Wars, and the Cold War. The canon of IR theory has always been dominated by thinkers like Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Morgenthau (Boesche, 2003) ^[1]. Although they are useful in understanding state behavior, politics of power, and international collaboration, these frameworks have a Eurocentric bias that tends to disregard the strategic cultures of non-Western civilizations. With the rise of Asia and other parts of the world as world powers, there exists an academic inclination to expand IR theory to accommodate the indigenous views to include various historical experiences and political philosophies (Mishra, 2012) ^[2]. It is in this regard that the study of non-Western strategic thought is not only an academic endeavor but one that is still required to create a more inclusive and representative view of world politics. India, China, and Islamic world civilizations had already developed advanced thoughts on diplomacy, warfare, government, and international relations between states, long before the modern Western states were born (Surpi *et al.*, 2020) ^[3]. These practices present different conceptual tools to examine the new dynamics of international relations related to the state in the multipolar world, where there are many centers of power. The integration of such views can be used to refute the universal assumptions based on Western history and broaden the conceptual bases of IR by instilling culturally oriented approaches to statecraft and security. Among the most prominent contributions to the sphere of ancient India, one should refer to the work of Chanakya (or Kautilya or Vishnugupta), a famous military strategist, economist, and political philosopher who lived in the 4th century BCE. He worked as the personal counsel of Chandragupta Maurya and was instrumental in the formation of the Mauryan

Empire. The concepts of Chanakya can still be found in the Arthashastra, which is a treatise on government, economics, military tactics, intelligence, and foreign politics. The Arthashastra is often likened to *The Prince* by Machiavelli; it is a realistic and even brutal look into politics, where the most important thing is national security, amassing of power, and the ability to count properly. (Singh, 2013) ^[4] Nevertheless, unlike most works of the West, it unites domestic government with foreign policy into a unified system of statecraft. At the core of the foreign policy doctrine of Chanakya is the Mandala Theory, which is also the Rajamandala or the circle of the kings. This theory is a concept that the international environment is a circle of states of varying sizes that are concentric, with a central ruler. By this structure, the neighbors are the natural competitors as they fight over territory, resources, and power, whereas the states outside of the competitors are possible allies since they are interested in having a common opponent counterbalanced. According to Chanakya, neighboring states were categorized into enemy state (ari), friend state (mitra), friend of foe state, friend of friend, middle power (madhyama), and neutral power (udasina). It is the relationships between these actors that are not fixed at any given moral or ethical commitment and are fluid, based on changing interests (Pranavbk, 2025) ^[5]. The Mandala Theory, therefore, introduces a progressive and early theory of interstate relations that is grounded in power games, alliances, and geographical situations. Its focus on self-interest and security dilemmas and change of alliances bears close semblance with the main assumptions of modern Realist theory. Analysing this ancient paradigm, one can learn much about the non-Western approaches to diplomacy and how the classical Indian political thought is reflected in the modern world of international relations.

The present paper defends the Mandala Theory by Chanakya as a theoretical framework on interstate relations based on the concept of power, security, and strategic interest. The paper, based on the concepts of the Arthashastra by Chanakya, argues that the Mandala Theory was an early statement of realism, and before the modern

Western theories of IR. The paper examines the conceptual organization of the Rajamandala, such as the division of the states, the pattern of alliances, and the influence of geography on the creation of foreign policy behavior. It also reviews how the theory applies in the current international politics, especially in a multipolar system of politics where alliances and strategies are volatile and dynamic. Placing the ideas of Chanakya into the context of the general IR discussion, the paper demonstrates the value of non-Western intellectual discourse in the enrichment of the study of the international relations field and creates a well-balanced portrayal of the role of the contribution of ancient India to the concept of political realism.

Historical and Intellectual Context

The formation of the Chanakyan political thought should be put in the context of the political upheaval of India in the times of the Mahajanapada (c. 600–300 BCE). The period was characterized by the presence of several local kingdoms and republics that were fighting over lands, resources, and power in the Indo-Gangetic plains. The need to engage in constant war, alliances, as well as the use of diplomatic strategies, placed a world where surviving was based upon the ability to look ahead and to strategize (Jain, 2023) ^[6]. There was no single powerful state, so the rulers needed to manoeuvre an extensive interstate system that could be likened to a balance-of-power arrangement. One of these fragmentations was the formation of the Mauryan Empire with Chandragupta Maurya leading the all-powerful unification of much of the Indian subcontinent during the late 4th century BCE. The emergence was closely related to the teachings of Chanakya, a Taxila scholar who became his chief consultant, teacher, and strategist (Boesche, 2003) ^[1]. Chanakya is also credited with masterminding the toppling of the Nanda dynasty and laying plans for the administrative and military principles of the new empire. The fact that his practical life was in the field of governance and diplomacy informed his theoretical works greatly. The concept of Chanakya is systematically compiled in the book of Arthashastra, a great book of statecraft. The subject of the text is varied and covers political government, taxation, law, espionage, war, diplomacy, and economic government. It mainly aimed at advising rulers on how to uphold peace internally as they embark on the path of conquering the outer world and ensuring their safety (Budac, 2015) ^[8]. The Arthashastra was organized into several books and chapters and is composed of normative prescriptions and pragmatic strategies, and represents a realistic evaluation of human nature and political competition. The work is more narrowly part of a long tradition of statecraft in ancient India that focused on obligations to kingship (rajadharma), a commitment to material prosperity (artha), and state protection. This tradition identified power, intelligence collection, and strategic alliances as instruments of governance. The combination of these thoughts by Chanakya resulted in one of the most advanced political texts in the history of the ancient world, the intellectual background of the Mandala Theory of interstate relations.

Conceptual Foundations of Mandala Theory

The Mandala Theory, formulated by Chanakya and contained in the Arthashastra, offers a mechanized framework of interstate relations grounded on geographical factors, power, and strategic interest. Mandala literally

means circle and describes an area of space with a central kingdom. Political power, according to Chanakya, exists in the form of a geographically organised environment where proximity brings about competition. The neighboring countries are viewed as natural enemies since they are also fighting on the same territory, resources, and power, and this poses a security dilemma that is geographically based. On the other hand, the position of the states is that they will be future allies because they will have a common interest in balancing the competing powers. In this cyclic system, Chanakya classified the states into different categories (Saad & Wenxiang, 2020) ^[9]. The direct imminent risk is the Ari (enemy), which is the neighboring state. The Mitra (friend) is the enemy of the enemy whose interests are the same as those of the ruling ruler in the middle. Outside these two main actors are the second sets: the Ari-mitra or friend of the enemy, and the Mitra-mitra or friend of the friend. Two other forms are broader in a strategic sense. The Madhyama is a middle power that stands between the competitors and can determine the results, either by taking sides with one. Udasina refers to a distant force or neutral that is not involved in the direct fight yet, which can intervene when its interests are compromised. This stratification and categorization depict an ingenious conception of the alliance networks and balance-of-power politics. An important characteristic of the Mandala system is the dynamic character of relationships. Alliances are not here to stay, but they are subject to shifting interests and power calculations. Strategic necessity is more important than ideology and cultural affinity or moral commitments (Gökcan, 2023). States can alternately be friends and enemies, or the other way around, depending on the change of circumstances. This practical approach to making decisions highlights the realist perspective of international politics in which survival and gain are more important than affection, and where diplomacy, war, and war alliances are not a show of everlasting devotion but a tool of state interest.

Strategic Instruments in Mandala Theory

The Mandala Theory of Chanakya, introduced in the Arthashastra, defines a set of detailed apparatus of the strategic tools based on which a ruler can seek security and growth. Such tools portray a very pragmatic attitude towards the relations between states, in which morality is subservient to the *raison d'état*. The central position of this structure is taken by diplomacy and the formation of alliances. One of the pieces of advice given to a ruler is that one should establish friendship with powers that are distant, as they control or hold down closer ones. Alliances are transactional arrangements and not enduring engagements, but conditions that are short-lived based on the fluctuating interests and power calculations. War is discussed as an adequate continuation of the policy in case peaceful methods are not able to guarantee the achievement of goals in the state (Kumar, 2025) ^[11]. Chanakya differentiates open warfare, covert operations, and strategic deterrence, stressing that open armed conflict should be considered only in instances when the scale tips to the side of the aggressor. Military moves are thus one of several tools used, and not the only determinant of power. Another critical pillar in the Mandala strategy is espionage and covert operations. The Arthashastra promotes a vast intelligence network to acquire information, create division among the foes, and exert political control over other states. Spies, informants, and

secret agents are described as invaluable not only in terms of in-country protection but also as external control. The economic indicators are also quite important. The domination of trade circuits, resources, and revenue systems can demoralize the enemies without a face-off with them. Penalties, embargoes, and bribes are suggested as the steps to influence the actions of other states. Collectively, these tools play a role in balance-of-power mechanisms to deter aggressive alliances from affecting the throne of the ruler.

Mandala Theory as an Early Form of Realism

The Mandala Theory, which has its strategic perspective, also shares a lot with the fundamentals of political realism, which is why it is one of the first known examples of realist philosophy. Realism is based on the fact that the international system is anarchic, states are its major forces, and survival is their ultimate aim. The key tool of ensuring such survival is power, whether it is military, economic, or diplomatic power. These assumptions are reflected by the framework put forth by Chanakya, who rates self-interest, competition, and the inevitable nature of a conflict between neighbouring states in terms of self-interest (Mishra, 2012) ^[2]. Chanakya has most frequently been compared to subsequent Western philosophers like Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes. Similar to Machiavelli, Chanakya promotes a realistic and even brutal view of ruling, believing that leaders should be ready to use the art of deception, force, or coercion in order to maintain the state. Likewise, the picture of an insecure and distrusted state Hobbes presents when there is no supreme power is similar to that of Chanakya, who sees the relations between states as states of war. Hans Morgenthau, who stressed national interest, which has to be defined in terms of power, is another modern realist scholar whose ideas were predicted by Mandala Theory. Both of the systems consider morality as secondary to the demands of existence and stability. To Chanakya, the major role of the ruler is to maintain and advance the state, and that this entails manipulation and coercion. His analysis is imbued with concepts like deterrence, balancing of alliances, and strategic calculation. Finally, power, survival, and national interest are the main themes that connect Mandala Theory to the realist tradition. Chanakya provides a non-Western version of contemporary realism with a systematic model of interstate behavior that is founded on pragmatic statecraft (Surpi *et al.*, 2020) ^[3]. His observations reveal the existence of elaborate theories of power politics all over the globe long before the formal introduction of the International Relations Academy, indicating the universality of the realist thought throughout the US and all other parts of the globe.

Relevance to Modern International Relations

The Mandala Theory formulated by Chanakya in the Arthashastra remains useful in the policies of modern international relations due to its clarification of patterns of power rivalry, coalition formation, and strategy among states. Its tendencies towards geography, self-interest, and changing partnerships are very close to the current geopolitical realities. Balance of power politics is one of the most relevant domains. Strategic alliances among states are a common occurrence, as states evidently seek to allay the perceived threatening potential of others in the international system that follows the Mandala principle, which states that the sworn enemy of one is an ally of one. The modern

geopolitics is dominated by the regional competition, which promotes the process of coalition, be it a formal alliance or security association, or issue-related collaboration (Singh, 2013) ^[4]. These are usually practical and not ideological in nature, so that no one particular power attains a supreme dominance. Another issue that is provided in the theory is the security dilemma that has existed between neighboring states since time immemorial. The close location is a source of distrust since any defensive strategy adopted by one state is seen as offensive by the other. Arms races, modernization of military, and Phoenixes of deterrence are the driving forces behind such a dynamic, although direct warfare is not involved. Border conflicts, overlapping territorial claims, and fears of strategic encirclement explain why neighboring nations are still stuck in the rut of mistrust, and this is consistent with the opinion held by Chanakya that neighboring states were natural adversaries. Lastly, the Mandala model is quite close to the current multipolar world order. The comparative weakening of one major power, the emergence of several regional and global powers, has created a multifaceted system of intersecting interests (Pranavbk, 2025) ^[5]. Instead of the inflexible Cold War method of blocs, states are shifting to more flexible ties, actively participating in relationships with other competing forces to gain as much freedom and as many advantages. This art of diplomacy, as hedging or balancing strategies, reflects the concept of Mandala, shifting alliances depending on a shifting situation. Therefore, an Indian statecraft theory that existed many centuries ago still manages to offer one of the strongest perspectives in interpreting how world politics work nowadays.

Application to India's Foreign Policy

Mandala Theory act as an analytical tool in appreciating the current foreign policy activity of India and, to a larger extent, its regional actions and interactions on a larger strategic level. The relationship between India and its neighbours implies the Mandala assumption that as countries become closer through geographic location, interdependence and rivalry are created. South Asia borders, insecurity, and power struggles are usually part of the economic alliance and cultural relations. The processes of Indian diplomacy are aimed at smaller neighbors, namely, helping them, engaging them, and being careful of tactics, which is already done in accordance with the scheme of putting stability in the first place and overcoming external intervention. The core aspect of the Indian approach to the external strategy is the strategic autonomy doctrine that is aimed at maintaining decision-making autonomy instead of making permanent alignment to a specific power bloc. This is similar to the principle of the Mandala of flexible alliances, as grounded on national interests and not ideology. India is also collaborating with various nations under certain matters of security, trade, technology, or energy without making any binding obligations that may limit its freedom of operation. The fact that India is a member of various global arrangements also portrays this practical nature. Through its simultaneous involvement in various forums, India can optimize the space in diplomacy and mitigate the risks associated with the global system. This multilateral interaction would enable India to deal with the Western and non-Western partners in different ways, which also denotes a diversification strategy but not a sole alignment (Jain, 2023) ^[6]. It is especially critical to strike a

balance between relations and major powers. India retains alliances with other players in the global arena and balances the tensions to ensure that it is not sucked into the great-power dilemmas in the global arena, deriving economic and security interests out of each. In the South Asian region, the diplomatic policies of India are focused on connecting, providing development aid, and sharing security with the goals of opposing the foreign powers, which want to influence the South Asian region. The results of this tendency are collaborative and competitive; such an approach reflects a Mandala concept of stratified relations between neighboring states and external actors.

Comparative Analysis: Mandala vs Western IR Theories

Comparing the Mandala Theory and the mainstream Western theories of IR, both similarities and original contributions can be identified. The Realism theory is the one that is most similar to the idea of Realism since international politics are seen to involve power competition among self-seeking states in an anarchic system. Both models give emphasis to security, national interest, and competition as the main factors in state behavior. But Mandala Theory emphasizes more heavily the proximity of geography in that it specifically formulates relationships in terms of space and location, and not as functionally equivalent actors. Liberalism, on the contrary, concentrates on cooperation, international institutions, and economic interdependence as a means of peace. Mandala Theory does not deny cooperation but does not attribute it instrumentally, as a provisional measure to increase power as opposed to a source of long-term peace. Constructivism emphasizes the impact of norms, identities, and notions on international conduct, as Mandala Theory places more emphasis on material potentials and calculation of strategies, placing little value on collective values or socialized ideas. The peculiar advantage of the Mandala Theory consists in its dynamic categorization of the relations, awareness of the changing alliances, and combination of diplomatic, military, and economic tools into one strategy (Saad & Wenxiang, 2020)^[9]. Such an empirical realism is captured by contrast with many other Western models that have been formulated by pure conceptual models, making it more realistic. Besides, Mandala Theory enables the development of the new sphere of Global IR by showing that there were also elaborate studies of international politics beyond the Western tradition. It highlights the significance of indigenous knowledge systems in enhancing theoretical diversity and provides alternate views on how power, security, and diplomacy are perceived in an ever-multipolar world.

Application to India's Foreign Policy

The Mandala Theory of Chanakya, which was presented in the Arthashastra by Chanakya, offers an interesting way of seeing the Indian foreign policy in the present day, particularly in the adjacent regions as well as on a larger strategic level. The Mandala assumption that a proximate neighbor with a state generates cooperation as well as rivalry is evident in the relations of India with the states around it. The conflicts over the boundary, the security issues, migration issues, and the competition for regional influence usually accompany the trade, cultural exchange, and developmental partnerships. The foreign policy of India is generally one that is composed of both economic aid and

political involvement, coupled with certain restraints to deter any outside force in South Africa. One aspect that characterized its foreign policy is the concept of strategic independence, based on which the country places its focus on autonomous decision-making instead of close adherence to any of the major blocs of power. This principle resembles the Mandala principle, according to which alliances are to be ameliorative and driven by the national interest instead of by ideology. India also cooperates with various nations in the field of defense, technology, energy, and trade without making any commitments that can limit its freedom of movement (Gökcan, 2023). This pragmatic orientation is also manifested by becoming members of several international groupings. Through the active participation in multiple forums at the same time, India has a wide range of diplomatic choices and a buffer against global political uncertainty, and is able to maintain fruitful relations with both the West and non-West. It is especially imperative to maintain ties with the larger powers. India maintains alliances with other hostile players on the world stage, keeping the situation under tension without getting involved in the conflicts of great powers and gaining both economic and security advantages from each of the relationships. In South Asia, its regional policy focuses on connectedness initiatives, humanitarian aid, and security collaboration, as well as attempts to counter competition by other external forces. Such concomitant collaboration and rivalry is closely similar to the Mandala model of interstate relations that are dynamic and layered.

Conclusion

The Mandala Theory, commonly known as the Mandala Theory of interstate relations, according to Chanakya, as presented in the Arthashastra, provides an elaborate and advanced approach to studying interstate relations on the basis of power, security, and strategic calculation. The paper has discussed the historical background of the theory, its conceptual premises, strategic tools, and the remarkable similarities of the theory to contemporary international relations. Organizing states based on geographic location and interests, Mandala Theory explains the patterns of rivalry, alliances, and diplomatic games, which can still be observed in modern world politics. The analysis shows that Mandala Theory might be considered an antecedent of the Western realist thought, more than a century earlier than Realism. The fact that it focuses on its own interest, balance of power, security dilemma, and the primacy of national survival is almost all in line with the assumptions of the realist theory. Simultaneously, the framework provides distinctive knowledge, especially its spatial cognition of power and its dynamic concept of shifting alliances, which complement traditional realist views. The Mandala Theory is still relevant in contemporary times of a multipolar world, i.e., the emergence of new powers, unsteady associations, and disputes regarding strategies of international politics. The political logic of Realists (as explained by Chanakya) is the reason why increasingly states seek the flexibility of alignments and hedging strategies as opposed to the inflexible block politics. This is what makes his findings about state behavior timeless. Last but not least, the paper reminds us of the need to incorporate native intellectual traditions into the IR research. Identifying the non-Western input not only restores the historical imbalance of the discipline but also supplies a wider range of tools of

analysis of global politics. The book of Chanakaya is a classic example of the richness of the Indian approaches to statecraft and can still teach much about power, wisdom, and tactics that are still being reiterated in the contemporary international system.

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