



Kautilya's India: Managing China's Rise in the Indo-Pacific

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ABSTRACT

Western thinkers' criticisms of Indian strategic culture stem from the standards and values they have defined. Doubting the strategic thinking of a civilizational nation reflects either inadequate research or intentional disregard. With India's growing influence in global politics, presenting its strategic perspective to the world has become imperative. This requires extensive research and dissemination of India's major strategic texts, such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Arthashastra*, along with practical implementation through policy initiatives. Therefore, in this research paper, the power politics of the Indo-Pacific region are analysed through Kautilya's war philosophy, and the applicability of his principles in safeguarding India's strategic interests in this region is discussed.

Introduction

India's political, economic and military strategies are deeply rooted in Acharya Kautilya's Arthashastra. Strategic thoughts related to Kautilya's war philosophy remain highly relevant today. In Arthashastra, he reflects on the army, military organisation, weapons, camps, forts, and intelligence systems, as well as various war strategies and their supporting elements, including Mandala Theory and Shadgun Niti. A Vijigishu (king/state desirous of conquest) can fulfil ambitious objectives through this framework. The Indo-Pacific region has become the centre of power politics. It is a focal point for the world's major military and economic powers due to its strategic significance. Amidst aggressive, authoritarian, and expansionist China, hegemonic America, wealthy Japan, friendly Australia, and cautious ASEAN, politically and strategically strong, self-reliant India is safeguarding its interests. The



answer to the complex power politics of the Indo-Pacific is reflected in the Mandala Theory and the Shadgun Niti of Vijigishu India, which is analysed in this paper through Kautilya's war philosophy.

Indo-Pacific Region: Geographical Introduction and Strategic Importance-

Currently, Indo-Pacific is one of the most frequently used geopolitical terms in the world. German geopolitical scholar Karl Haushofer introduced the concept of the Indo-Pacific in the 1920s.^[1] During the Cold War, the Atlantic region between the United States and the Soviet Union was the centre of geopolitics. Following the Cold War, the early 21st century saw a predominantly unipolar world order, led by the United States. The process of globalisation in the 21st century has contributed to the emergence of a multipolar international order, with China establishing itself as a dominant economic actor in the Indo-Pacific region, alongside other significant powers such as India, Japan, and South Korea. China's expansionist and aggressive behaviour has disrupted the region's security. Home to approximately 60% of the global population, the Indo-Pacific region accounts for nearly two-thirds of global economic output. Furthermore, around 90% of India's trade is conducted through this strategically vital area. India holds a key economic and strategic position in this region. Statements like the "Confluence of the Two Seas" by Shinzo Abe in the Indian Parliament, Gurpreet Khurana's article on the Indo-Pacific, and subsequent inclusion of the term in the official defence documents of Australia and the U.S. underline the region's importance.^[2]

China's assertive expansionist policies have alarmed regional powers. From the South China Sea to Africa, China is building military bases and expanding its influence through the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative and debt-trap diplomacy. The geographical scope of the Indo-Pacific is defined differently by each nation, shaped by their respective national interests. India's conception of the Indo-Pacific spans both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, stretching from the eastern coast of Africa to the shores of the Americas.^[3] This expansive region includes countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, and nearby island states, as well as significant maritime zones like the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, Red Sea, Persian Gulf, Andaman Sea, South China Sea, and the Sea of Okhotsk.

Maritime trade is heavily reliant on strategically significant chokepoints such as the Cape of Good Hope, the Suez Canal, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Strait of Malacca, which serve as essential conduits for global commerce. The Strait of Malacca ranks among the world's most heavily trafficked maritime routes, accommodating over 94,000 ships annually and facilitating nearly 30 per cent of global trade.^[4] This corridor is particularly critical for energy security, as over 80 per cent of China's and Japan's crude



oil imports transit through it.^[5] In response to this strategic vulnerability, China has termed the situation the 'Malacca Dilemma' and has been actively pursuing alternative transit routes. India, recognising the strategic significance of the strait and its proximity to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, established the Andaman and Nicobar Command in 2001 to reinforce coastal defence and safeguard its maritime interests.^[6]

The Indo-Pacific region is deeply connected to India, as its ships have contributed to regional prosperity since ancient times. Trade flourished between Gulf nations via ports on India's western coast and Southeast Asian countries through its eastern coastline. Even today, evidence of Indian culture remains visible in nations such as Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Japan. India's Act East and Act West foreign policies aim to strengthen these historical ties through economic and strategic cooperation. A substantial number of Indian expatriates live in Gulf nations and Southeast Asia, making significant financial contributions at both local and global levels. India's trade in these regions has now exceeded \$160 billion.^[7] Beyond safeguarding its strategic interests, India bears a broader responsibility to promote peace, stability, and security in the Indo-Pacific—particularly in light of rising China-centric security concerns, energy vulnerabilities, and evolving economic challenges. Given the region's emergence as the financial and commercial nucleus of the 21st century, ensuring stability in this region is essential for sustaining global economic prosperity. India envisions the Indo-Pacific as a free, open, inclusive, peaceful, and prosperous region. India advocates for a rules-based order, sustainable development, transparent infrastructure projects, mutual respect for sovereignty, peaceful dispute resolution, and upholding ASEAN's central role in this region.

China in the Indo-Pacific -

The influence of power politics has intensified in the geopolitically and geo-economically vital Indo-Pacific region. China, a dominant force in this region, plays a critical role in the global supply chain. To advance its strategic interests, it frequently bends international rules and norms to suit its convenience. The United States, the region's strongest power, perceives China's rise as a direct threat to its global influence. China's economic and technological advancements have disrupted U.S. dominance in the global supply chain, while its military expansion poses an immediate security concern for the U.S., its allies, and India.

Territorial disputes between China and several regional actors, including India, Taiwan, Japan, and various South China Sea littoral states, underscore the intensifying strategic tensions in the Indo-



Pacific. The ongoing conflict in the South China Sea exemplifies China's assertive geopolitical posture and its persistent challenges to international maritime law and established regional norms. China has unilaterally expanded its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), constructing artificial islands and military bases to extend its territorial reach. Among the disputed areas, the Spratly Islands, Paracel Islands, and Scarborough Shoal fall within China's controversial "Nine-Dash Line" claim over the South China Sea.^[8] The main claimants in this territorial conflict include China, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei, and the Philippines.

In 2013, the Philippines filed a legal case in the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, which ruled in its favour in 2016.^[9] However, China continues to defy the ruling. Beyond the South China Sea, China and Japan remain locked in a dispute over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, while China's conflict with South Korea revolves around fishing rights.^[10] Additionally, Japan and Russia dispute sovereignty over four islands in the Southern Kuril chain.^[11] Amidst these territorial tensions and regional instability, ensuring unimpeded international maritime trade and safeguarding India's strategic interests in the Western Pacific Ocean remain urgent priorities.

China is actively pursuing a strategy to expand its military and strategic footprint in the Indian Ocean Region through the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative. This approach involves substantial investments in high-risk infrastructure projects and is often associated with a debt-trap diplomacy model. Within the Indian strategic discourse, this pattern is commonly interpreted as the 'String of Pearls'—a network of Chinese-backed ports and facilities encircling India and enhancing Beijing's influence across the region. China's first military base in Djibouti has been operational since 2017, and it is continuously strengthening its foothold in the Indian Ocean. Acharya Kautilya's Mandala Theory remains crucial for understanding power politics in this region, particularly amidst ongoing territorial disputes, strategic challenges, and diplomatic manoeuvres.

Kautilya's India in the Indo-Pacific-

Acharya Kautilya explained inter-state relations through his Mandala Theory, which remains relevant for state security even today. He referred to the king (state) who aspires to dominance as Vijigishu, possessing the qualities of Aatma-Sampanna, Amatya-Sampanna, and Niti-Sampanna. With the Vijigishu state at the centre, Kautilya formulated the Mandala Theory based on twelve state classifications and the Shadguna Niti (six-fold policy) to ensure successful governance. These policies include Sandhi (treaty of peace), Vigrah (war), Aasan (neutrality), Yaan (marching), Sanshraay



(alliance), and Dwaiddhi Bhaava (double policy).^[12] Within the Mandala Theory, Kautilya identifies a bordering hostile state as a natural enemy (Ari), while the state adjacent to this enemy is regarded as a friend (Mitra). Additionally, the state placed behind is known as Pashnigrah, and the state next to it is Aakranda. Other classifications in the Mandala Theory include Arimitra, Mitramitra, and Arimitramitra in the front, while the Pashnigrahasara and Akranadasaar states are positioned at the rear. The powerful state situated between Vijigishu and Ari is termed Madhyam, whereas the Udasin state, placed outside the immediate circle, is stronger than Vijigishu, Ari, and Madhyam combined. In the contemporary global scenario, the Mandala Theory remains highly relevant in understanding power politics in the Indo-Pacific region and India's strategic interests. India embodies the qualities of Vijigishu, as outlined by Kautilya—Amatya Sampanna (strong democratic government) and Niti Sampanna (rule-based governance) and is advancing toward Aatma Sampanna (self-reliance).

Acharya Kautilya advises the Vijigishu state to enter into a treaty to strengthen its power, stating that the purpose of such a treaty is to weaken the enemy state and make itself more powerful. India shares its border with China and Pakistan, which are considered India's natural enemies and are of an enemy nature according to the Mandala Theory. However, it is noteworthy that Kautilya does not consider every neighbouring state hostile; he also classifies the states as friendly and dependent.^[13] The nations bordering India—Bhutan, Maldives, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar—fall into this category. These countries are less powerful than India and do not have major border disputes with it. Thailand and Indonesia, influenced by Indian culture, have no land disputes with India, although Indonesia has a maritime border dispute with China.

China has challenged America's economic, technological, and military supremacy, causing suspicion among its other allies, including Japan and Taiwan, which rely on the United States for security. China's allies, such as Pakistan and North Korea, pose a significant threat to the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific region. The United States, despite being a global economic and military powerhouse, struggles to counter both Russia and China simultaneously. The friendship between Russia and China, once adversaries, has been forged due to their mutual challenges from the United States and their economic and military-technical dependence on each other.

France, with 1.5 million citizens and 8,000 soldiers stationed across both oceans, shares strategic interests that align closely with India.^[14] Britain is linked to Australia and the United States through a military treaty. Japan is an important friend and partner of India, offering economic and technological support to further India's interests in the region. Recognising ASEAN countries' security concerns, India



is strengthening its strategic relations with them through bilateral and multilateral agreements. India has significant trade, energy, and migrant interests in the Western Indian Ocean region. Meanwhile, China is expanding its military presence in India's neighbourhood and the Indian Ocean through an expansionist approach, creating a strategic challenge for India.

Managing China's Rise in the Indo-Pacific-

Kautilya's Mandala Theory outlines four measures for the Vijigishu to implement foreign policy: Sama (Peace/conciliation), Daan (Gift/Purchase/Bribe), Bhed (division or diplomacy), and Danda (force/Penalty). In line with these principles, India is actively working to maintain maritime security in the Indo-Pacific while securing its national interests. To enhance its surveillance and operational capabilities, India has signed military logistics agreements with France, the United States, Singapore, South Korea, Japan, Australia, Russia, Britain, and Vietnam.^[15] The Indian Navy is fostering partnerships with friendly nations in the Indian Ocean region through capacity-building programs, training, naval logistics assistance, seminars, port visits, and hydrographic and oceanographic surveys. Joint operational capabilities are being strengthened through bilateral and multilateral exercises with partner navies across the Indo-Pacific region.

India has expanded the concept of Security and Development for All (SAGAR) and launched the Initiative for Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Development (MAHASAGAR) to extend security cooperation across the Indo-Pacific.^[16] Through these initiatives, India aims to build security and development partnerships with like-minded countries. India has also signed agreements for naval access to several ports across the Indo-Pacific, including Sabang in Indonesia and Duqm in Oman. Additionally, India collaborates with Quad allies on climate change, global supply chains, and vaccines. Through its mission-based deployment strategy, the Indian Navy safeguards India's maritime interests and secures vital sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean against various threats.^[17]

India's maritime doctrine identifies the Indian Ocean Region as its primary strategic focus, with secondary interests extending to the Western Pacific, where China's expansionist policies have alienated multiple nations. In alignment with Acharya Kautilya's strategic insights, Vijigishu India is leveraging the Mandala Theory to manage China, which fits the description of an Ari.

Conclusion

India alone cannot counter adversaries like China in the Indo-Pacific. While China seeks to restrict India to the Indian Ocean, India is building partnerships to secure influence in the Western



Pacific. According to the Mandala Theory, China's adversaries are natural allies of India. Guided by Kautilya's Shadgun Niti, India is fortifying its geopolitical standing in the Indo-Pacific. With significant military power and partnerships, India must continue enhancing self-reliance and pursue technological and economic cooperation with partners like the U.S. and Japan.

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