Rajamandala Theory and India's International Relations*

Amalendu Misra

Senior Lecturer, Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion, Lancaster University, United Kingdom. Professor and researcher at the Centro de História da Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal.

Abstract

In contemporary international relations India is regarded as one of the major powers. India's emergence as a key global actor is based on its international political posturing, growing economic strength, dynamic cultural influence and a potent military machine. Gifted by these assets India postulates itself as a natural global leader. However, India's power projection is not based simply on these inheritances. There is a carefully cultivated strategic vision that drives this expansionist posture. If that is so, how were to identify this vision? What are the key components of this strategy? It is argued that there is a specific theoretical framework borrowed from a two-millennium old indigenous policy framework which has stood the test of time, forming the bedrock of contemporary Indian international relations.

Resumo

A Teoria de *Rajamandala* e as Relações Internacionais da Índia

Nas relações internacionais contemporâneas a Índia é vista como uma das maiores potências. A ascensão da Índia como um ator-chave no panorama global assenta na sua postura política internacional, no seu crescente poder económico, numa influência cultural dinâmica e numa máquina militar potente. Com base nestes recursos o país vê-se a si próprio como um líder natural à escala global, existindo uma cuidada e cultivada visão estratégica que pauta esta postura expansionista. Sendo este o caso, como se pode identificar esta visão? Quais são os componentes-chave desta estratégia?

Argumenta-se que existe uma moldura política teórica autóctone e específica que remonta a mais de dois mil anos, a qual resistiu ao passar do tempo, constituindo a base das relações internacionais contemporâneas da Índia.

* The author is grateful to the participants of the Instituto da Defesa Nacional (IDN, Lisboa), Seminar on India's Foreign Policy and Strategic Culture (24th November 2015) for their critical comments on an earlier draft of this essay that helped refine some of the arguments presented here.

In contemporary international relations, India is regarded as one of the major powers. India's emergence as a key global actor is based on its international political posturing, growing economic strength, dynamic cultural influence and a potent military machine. Gifted by these assets India postulates itself as a natural global leader. However, India's power projection is not based simply on these inheritances. There is a carefully cultivated strategic vision that drives this expansionist posture. If that is so, how were to identify this vision? What are the key components of this strategy?

While engaging with the above sets of questions I argue that there is a specific theoretical framework that forms the bedrock of contemporary Indian relations. Indian external strategy, I wish to argue, borrows from a two-millennium old indigenous policy framework that has stood the test of time. The theory in question, was developed and examined by several ancient Indian strategic theorists (notably Shukra, Manu, and Kamandaka). However, the credit goes to Vishnu Gupta or Kautilya (350 BC-275 BC) for perfecting it and providing a coherent framework that could be used as a policy by any given sovereign or state seeking to gain global supremacy. This idea, the doctrine of the sphere of sovereign influence or *Rajamandala*[1] theory introduced in Kautilya's most celebrated work the *Arthashastra* is the most fundamental in terms of providing a viable strategic imperative to the state's external power projection.

This essay is built around four interconnected themes. First, it introduces *Rajamandala* theory. Second, it examines the explanation of international relations within the ambits of this theory. Third, it brings into discussion the dimension of expansionism and how India has positioned itself in recent years in the global arena. Fourth and last, it postulates the tensions in current Indian strategic thinking and the broader ramifications *Rajamandala* theory. In sum, this essay is a critical reflection on the theoretical and policy linkages between Kautilya's *Rajamandala* theory and the nature of contemporary Indian international relations.

Rajamandala Theory

While the *Rajamandala* theory is generally attributed Kautilya he was one of several thinkers who engaged with this idea in ancient India and perfected it as an integral instrument of statecraft. The *Arthashastra* (the treatise/discourse on means to order) one of the earliest examples in the world of a manual devoted to the strategy of power was a collective effort by several thinkers over a length of time, perhaps stretching over centuries (Roy, 2013: 75).

1 This premise is also popularly known as *Mandala* theory. However, I would use the term *Rajamandala* throughout this essay, owing to the rather expansive definition that *Rajamandala* provides over the somewhat constricting dimension of *Mandala*.

Kautilya's interpretation of the nature and character of international society has remained timeless. The *Arthashastra* was written in times when the subcontinent was divided into a number of small and mutually hostile states. Therefore, it was necessary for a king to not only protect his state but also deal with hostile kings and expand his territory (Gupta, 2014).

There are several aspects to Kautilya's magnum opus the *Arthashastra*. The purpose of this study is to examine the strategy of inter-state relations. While so doing, it debates *Rajamandala* theory or *Mandala* theory that is often regarded Kautilya's core thesis dealing with the state-centred strategic vision. While staying true to this theory this essay asks if one could draw parallels between contemporary Indian strategic thinking and the core directions enumerated by Kautilya in his *Rajamandala* theory.

While commonly understood as a foreign policy outline, in its true manifestation *Rajamandala* theory is an expression of a state's "internal" and "external" sovereignty. It postulates that a state's sovereignty is in fact two dimensional. While the primary expression of that sovereignty is almost always easily identifiable (*i.e.* the sovereignty of the state over its natural political frontiers and the subjects living within it), the external dimension of this sovereignty is much more difficult to pin down.

Thus it receives its true meaning through a given state's ability to establish its credence outside its legally recognised boundaries. Therefore, according to the *Rajamandala* theory, a state can only be truly sovereign state when it "can exercise its internal authority unobstructed by, and independently of other states" (Sarkar, 1919: 400). It is this power in relation to other state that is paramount in understanding the full remits of *Rajamandala* theory and consequently the strategic depth of a state.

In Kautilya's conception, every sovereign state, polity or ruler is surrounded by many similar sovereign entities. In this galaxy of states there would always be one sovereign who would be a natural adversary to this king or ruler. He further reminds his audience that of this galaxy of states there would be vassals, allies, neutral and hostile sovereigns. However, the sovereign must pay the utmost emphasis to the natural enemy or state and do his utmost to defeat it.

Besides there are two inter-related facets to Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. While its core advice to the sovereign was the preservation of the state, it also expected the ruler to engage in expansionism that involved conquest of new territories under the control of other rulers or sovereigns. It was, in essence, a theory of world conquest.

Kautilya was "an expansionist who provided a discourse on strategic culture to the sovereign that not only seeks the preservation of the state but also amply pushes forward a framework that seeks to conquer territories of others" (Karad, 2015: 324). For the sovereign, "*Rajamandala* theory is the plan, the blueprint of the expedition with the intention of world conquest" (Karad, 2015: 327). In Abul Fazl's interpretation of Kautilya's *Rajamandala* "the sovereign whose territory adjoined to his, although he might be friendly in appearance, yet ought not to be trusted; he was

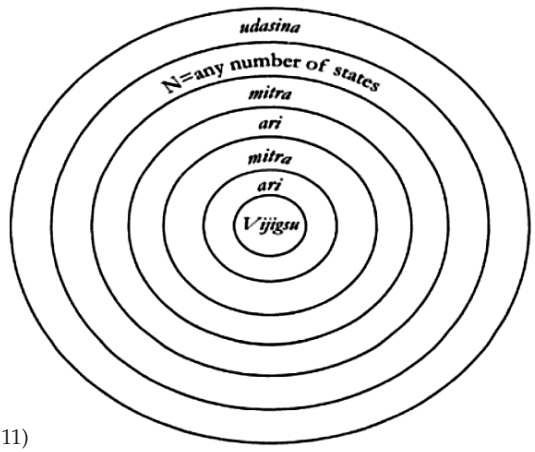
always be prepared to oppose any sudden attack from that quarter. A king who attempted to give trouble to another king without reasonable cause was an artificial enemy of that king" (Alami, 1993: 495).

The World According to *Rajamandala*

Arguably, *Rajamandala* theory "is at the core of Kautilya's conceptualisation of state affairs, which is the theory of omnipotence" (Karad, 2015: 322). It is based on the geopolitical and geostrategic assumption that "your neighbour is your natural enemy and the neighbour's neighbour is your friend". This was the basic thought behind Kautilya's *Rajamandala* theory. In view of many critics, "it is '[t]he Kautilyan concept of power (*mandala*), centring around the would-be conqueror (*vijigishu*) who uses six fold policy (*sadgunya*) to assume the position of a universal ruler (*chakravartin*) which is of supreme importance if one were to make sense of the *Mandala* theory" (Sarkar, 1919; Gautam, 2013: 21).

If one were to give it a visual representation, Kautilya's theory of the international system, from the perspective of a sovereign it could be represented by a series of concentric circles. In this conception, if the sovereign resides at the centre of this circle, hostile states are those that border the ruler's state, forming a circle around it. In turn, states that surround this set of hostile states form another circle around the circle of hostile states. This second circle of states can be considered the natural allies of the ruler's state against the hostile states that lie between them. Consequently, the sovereign wishing power and domination always try to put his state at the centre (*nabhi*) of the Circle and simultaneously make the friendly powers the spokes of the wheel (*nemi*).

Picture 1 – Visual Representation of Inter-state Relations according to *Rajamandala* Theory



Source: Singh (2011: 11)

Therefore, according to the above framework, "the king who is situated anywhere immediately on the circumference of the conqueror's territory is termed the enemy. The king who is likewise situated close to the enemy, but separated from the conqueror only by the enemy, is termed the friend (of the conqueror)" (*The Arthasastra*, 1992).

Speaking of enemies, and allies, Kautilya is well known for outlining and applying the '*Rajamandala* Theory of Foreign Policy'. The basic argument in his theory is that any neighbouring state should be considered as a potential enemy, and dealt with cautiously. This is because, Kautilya argues, all states act in their own self-interest, be it through waging war or negotiating peace. According to the *Mandala* theory, regional states are grouped in a circle and are numbered. Kautilya suggests that any states located on the other side of an enemy state can be considered an ally. The most obvious reason for this categorization seems to be the concept of 'sandwiching the enemy'. In more contemporary terms Kautilya's *Rajamandala* Theory can best be described by the principle stating the enemy of my enemy is my friend (Boesche, 2002).

Kautilya observed that every state is surrounded by many states, and there cannot be friendly states all around. In other words, the external frontiers of a given state can be divided into friendly and enemy territories. However, the important question that arises in this context is how does one recognize/label the tag of hostile enemy or genuine friendly frontier or territory. Kautilya's identity marker in this context was deceptively simply. In the *Arthashastra*, he proposed, that a sovereign's enemy's enemy could be accorded the status of a friend. And an enemy's friend should be treated as an enemy.

One of the key aspects of the *Rajamandala* theory with regard to the conduct of business with the enemy state has to do with the continuance of a hostile offensive defence position. Having identified the enemy (state) Kautilya suggested, the sovereign should conduct his/her hostility as an open undertaking. Since Kautilya's theorisation of inter-state external relations explains, "how the political world works actually, than that it ought to be" (Karad, 2015: 322), it has a strong resonance in the strategic vision of New Delhi. As one observer put it, "since its independence, India's international behaviour has unfolded in line with this theoretical logic. For starters, India has failed to set up good relations with neighbouring countries in the region. It has long been engaged in a rivalry with Pakistan, and it is also far from friendly with Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Antagonism with its neighbouring countries remains a main element of India's foreign policy" (Xinmin, 2014: 147).

While this may be true, one could also testify to the fact that bar its archrival Pakistan, from time to time, India has tried to build bridges with its other immediate neighbours. How was then one to explain New Delhi's overtures in the context of good neighbourly borderland policy? Again, while somewhat friendly, this

relationship has always been a tense affair. New Delhi simply has not succeeded in ridding the relationships of mutual distrust, tension, unilateral interference, occasional hostility, and thawing of bonhomie.

These far from friendly relations can be explained within Kautilya's conception of the *Rajamandala*. For, "the idea of the *Rajamandala* holds that relations between two contingent states will generally be tense, a fact that was definitely true of many regions, such as Europe, until fairly recently (this does not preclude the possibility of a neighbour being friendly or a vassal). This idea may explain the perception among India's smaller South Asian neighbours that India is an overbearing and dominating neighbour" (Pillalamarri, 2015: 17).

On his swearing in ceremony the 14th Prime Minister of India, Mr. Narendra Modi, invited all the heads of states of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to his swearing-in ceremony. Nothing wrong with that gesture. But examined within the above theory one could interpret it as an emperor's coronation invitation where the vassals were made obliged to come and pay their allegiance and respect. That all was not well with this bonhomie was soon apparent. Within months after this gathering, New Delhi's relationship with some of these very states metamorphosed into open criticism and hostility. Note, for instance, the landlocked republic of Nepal's recent plight. New Delhi brought the country's economy and life to a standstill for over four months (November 2015-February 2016) by orchestrating an internal dissent amongst a section of the country's populace. This led to the citizenry of some of those states openly condemning India as a big power bully.

In view of one critic, "India has always been on a high-alert and kept a very defensive attitude against interactive ties between any non-regional countries, especially big powers, and other countries in the subcontinent" (Xinmin, 2014: 159). This has been evidenced in case of Chinese economic and military incursions in Sri Lanka in the past. In recent years it has also been very critical of China-Pakistan economic corridor that connects northwest China with Pakistan's Arabian Sea coast. In view of some observers, this "strategic partnership between Pakistan and China has upset India and consequently it has openly voiced its opposition to the project" (Bhutta, 2015: 3). According to one Chinese scholar, such moves "may not be a purely historical coincidence. The strong magic power of India's *Mandala* geo-strategic thought and its strategic intention of seeking regional hegemony in South Asia are quite apparent" (Xinmin, 2014: 159).

If that were so, one could also identify New Delhi's representation of the immediate neighbour as *ari* or enemy and the one beyond the territory of the immediate neighbour as *mitra* or friend. Within the workings of this schema Afghanistan bordering Pakistan has been a traditional ally of New Delhi. So is India's relationship with Mongolia that sits just outside *ari* imagery (*i.e.* the immediate neighbour China). To

some observers, through its strategic partnership with Mongolia, "India is signalling something vital to the Chinese that the country can reach out to its backyard for apparent strategic considerations" (Chaturvedi, 2015: 2).

In recent years, we have witnessed New Delhi cultivating *mitras* (friends) as a bulwark against the *aris* (enemies). What New Delhi has been engaged with and is fast unveiling is the introduction and consolidation of several strategic corridors that allows it to counter its *ies* (immediate enemy). A case in point is the opening up of a strategic corridor with the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

India and the United Arab Emirates have started a new strategic partnership after a landmark visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Abu Dhabi in August, 2015, which includes unprecedented cooperation on counter terrorism, especially significant given that the UAE has traditionally been a close ally of Pakistan (NDTV, 2016).

Similarly, in 2015 India and Vietnam signed a joint vision statement for five years, which while it aims at "enhancing their bilateral defence cooperation" (The Times of India, 2015) is in reality a defence pact whole primary objective is to undermine China's hegemony in the South China Sea.

Power Consolidation-Expansion

According to the *Rajamandala* theory, the sovereign who has established his leadership or the state that finds itself firmly at the centre of a constellation of states occupies the site towards which other sovereigns or states gravitate. Put simply, "the theory of a circle of states entails that every ruler within an international system will find his (or her) state at the centre of its own circle of states. This ruler is described as a *vijigishu*, or would-be conqueror, whose power ought to gradually radiate into ever more distant circles" (Pillalamarri, 2015: 17). But what should the sovereign do to maintain that centrality?

One of the attendant features of *Rajamandala* as a strategic doctrine is to push an expansionist agenda for the sovereign. In its crudest form this expansionism may signify physical expansion through conquest of new territories, subjugation of nations and people outside the state's borders. For *The Arthashastra* "preaches the ideal of conquest meaning the ruler or the sovereign should be desirous of *digvijaya* (the conquest of all known territories on its borders)" (Roy, 2013: 77). In this framework *vijigishu/vijigeesoo* (ideal ruler or sovereign) should be an aspirant to conquer and conquest.

The expansionist ideal, of course, is not a given. Kautilya makes it very explicit under what circumstance a state or a sovereign can embark on that path. First if a state is a in a state of downward slide, if its sovereignty is under threat, it is a in a state of decline and there are serious questions surrounding its future stability, the ruler or the sovereign should make every effort at defending its sovereignty by

making alliances, solving internal problems and so on. On the other hand, if the state is set on a course of steady economic growth, with a contended citizenry, and no serious threat to its frontiers and most crucial of it is being led by an able and visionary leadership then it is in a natural position to embark on a path of conquest of the neighbouring states (Kautilya, 1992; Boesche, 2003: 4).

The *raison d'etre* of an effective sovereign or a sovereign state is to establish himself/itself as the *nabhi* (or centre of gravity) of a system – in this case the international system (*The Arthashastra*, 1992). Or, as one of the earliest modern scholars put it, the sovereign "should become the lord of a mandala. It is part of his (the sovereign's) duty to try to have a full sphere around him just as the moon is encircled by a complete orb" (Sarkar, 1919: 402).

Yet, interestingly, the conquest or expansionist objective encompassed a hard power expansionism referring to territorial gains by the sovereign or *vijigishu* desirous or aspirant to world conquest. The theory provided a framework for the sovereign to go beyond the mere conquest of physical territories and become a true world conqueror (*i.e. chakravartin* through soft power projection). Kautilya did not see this conquest as something unjust. A sovereign who carried out his duties, ruled according to law, meted out only just punishment, applied the law equally to his son and his enemy, and protected his subjects not only went to heaven but had conquered the earth up to its four ends.

In Kautilya's conception there can be three distinct sets of expansion by a given sovereign. They are *dharmavijaya* (conquest for the sake of glory); *lobhavijaya* (overthrow of the adversary for economic gains); and *asuravijaya* (the base expansion which results in annihilating your enemy and appropriating their women). The ideal expansion or conquest, according to Kautilya, is for the sake of glory (*dharmavijaya*). For the sovereign who wishes to remain the centre gravity can only remain so through *dharmavijaya*.

So, how does contemporary India feature in this system?

First, India has never been an expansionist state. While the physical or territorial expansionism has never been an avowed state policy, one cannot say the same so far as New Delhi's perpetual attempts at seeking to expand its area of influence.

In this context, one could argue that there has always been a clearly defined pattern to India's ideologically driven expansionism in the post-independence period. Faced by two aggressive superpowers (United States and Soviet Union) who were engaged in a relentless campaign to ever widen their sphere of influence during the Cold War years, India chose the safer alternative of reaching out to the hesitant and unsure group of nations through its policy of nonalignment. While a global ideal, shared by many non-western post-colonial states, India nonetheless was the natural leader in this forum. Through the nonalignment movement better known

through its acronym NAM, New Delhi forever sought to consolidate its position as the *primus inter pares*.

In recent years, New Delhi would appear to claim a global leadership role not only in hard power context but in soft power posturing as well. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's suggestion that India is a natural global leader in the areas of economy, environment and manpower are cases in point (Time, 2015). With that aim in mind New Delhi has focused on establishing a secure network of friends and allies in far afield. The India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) that pledged African nations US$ 600 million seeks to establish a specific strategic depth in Africa.

India's emphasis on 'blue economy' that brings Africa and India through the common sea frontier of the Indian Ocean is likely to score that soft power expansionist dividend. Also symbolic in this equation is mission statement of IAFS through its lion representation logo – which while gives an equal share to Africa nonetheless makes no secret of India's strategic ambitions "proud, courageous, bold and on the prowl, ready to take on the future and seize every opportunity" (The Business Standard, 2015).

This vision of soft power expansionism is further consolidated by a carefully cultivated diplomacy that has sought to translate specific Indian cultural practices (such as Yoga) into universal global values. India's soft power and expansionist ambition go hand-in-hand. And, it is no longer a secret. In the words of India's top diplomat, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, the "UN's decision to commemorate the International Day of Yoga underlines the appreciation for India and its growing soft power" (NDTV, 2015).[2]

Advantage Alliance

In view of some critics, Kautilya's *Matsya Nyaya* "entails struggle for power as the *sine qua non* of the 'internal' as well as the 'external sovereignty in the international arena" (Upadhyaya, 2009: 73). While Kautilya is clear about the nature of international system, in the *Arthashastra* he nonetheless suggest the sovereign to make peace with *ari* (or enemy) in order to secure the required time to enhance one's own power or establish a balance of power. While useful measures, they should, however, be temporary. These strategies should be abandoned as and when the sovereign is confident of his power and that of the state he rules. This striving towards enhancing one's power deficiency is solely aimed at consolidating the sovereign's strength in comparison to the enemy.

2 Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi introduced the idea in his address to the UN General Assembly in September 2014. This proposal was co-sponsored by 177 countries, out of 193 member states. This move created a new record for the highest number of co-sponsoring nations for a General Assembly Resolution.

In his seminal essay on Indian strategic culture, military historian and theorist George Tanham suggested, "India's self-conception, its geography, and military strength are of supreme importance in shaping the strategic culture" (Tanham, 1992: 129). Some quarter-of-a-century on while all of those parameters still determine India's strategic depth, a new rubric (*i.e.* economy) has come into play. Apart from being a great military power India has also clocked in an impressive economic growth rate in recent years (surpassing its arch-rival China in 2015). This development provides critical impetus to the shaping of New Delhi's own imagination of itself in the global stage and subsequently its strategic behaviour.

Way back in 1992 Tanham suggested that "some Indians would like India to be a great power, as opposed to a voice in the world" (Tanham, 1992: 129). Finally, nearly a quarter-of-a-century since, India appears to be steadying itself on that path of seeking a great power identity pursuing a

bigger and stronger economic, cultural and soft power variety. In his recent visit to the United Kingdom, the Indian Prime Minister addressed a congregation of some 60 thousand non-resident Indians in the Wembley Sports Arena, London. In that speech he demanded that the world treat India as an equal ("we don't want favours from the world, we want equal stature" – Dowerah, 2015), sums up the direction in India's strategic depth. Following on that he repeated the theme during the course of Association of South East Asian States (ASEAN) meeting in Kuala Lumpur. During his speech Modi proclaimed "we know that our time has come" (India Today, 2015). While this was in reference to the emerging role of Asia in international scene, the attempt was to put India at the heart of that Asian Century.

While this may be a legitimate aspiration, here one cannot help avoid asking the question: how far is India capable in terms of leading that Asian Century? Or can it be a dominant player in the scheme of things if there is ever an Asian Century?

Let me engage with these two interrelated questions head on. There are two key components to New Delhi's aspirations with regard to be at the forefront of this strategic vision. They are guided, in equal measures, by soft power strategy as well as the realpolitik considerations suggested along the lines of Kautilya.

In Kautilya's conception the sovereign ought to develop the ambit of his sovereignty by augmenting and exploiting its resources and power base. How is New Delhi exploiting its resources and its powerbase?

Thanks to its traditional rivalry/enmity with China and a majority of South East Asian states discomfort with the rising Chinese muscle in the region, New Delhi has a natural advantage. By using my 'enemy's enemy as my ally' New Delhi has pushed forward a new strategic vision in the South East Asian region. It has cultivated Myanmar and Vietnam as strategic partners, reiterated its stand as the defender of half-a-dozen regional powers claims over the South China Sea islands. Most important of all there are now talks of New Delhi and Washington

joint patrols in South China Sea (Miglani, 2016). These developments have given an unprecedented strategic depth to New Delhi's big power ambitions in the region.

While economic growth and material progress would appear to be a natural yearning for a state, the sovereign can use the idea of progress as part of consolidation of power and external outreach or non-territorial conquest. While India-Africa forum (discussed earlier) could be argued to aim at countering China in the external third and fourth ambit of the concentric circle in the *Rajamandala* diagram the initiatives in cultural diplomacy could be argued as strategies aimed at encasing India's interest in the outermost circles.

Similarly, Kautilya required his sovereign to be both pragmatic and prudence. Such an outlook and policy posture allowed him maximum flexibility in his foreign affairs and helped towards extending the remits of the state's sovereignty. Having ignored its sizeable diaspora community in the past, New Delhi has begun to embrace them in order to extend and boost its sphere of influence externally. In recent years, the advantage to its strategic posturing is aided by the presence of a significant Indian diaspora in countries like Singapore and Malaysia and its cultural influence in archipelagic Indonesia and mainland states of Cambodia and Laos. These physical and cultural ties have steered India's strategic ambitions into safer waters.

Yet as Yitzhak Klein put it, a nation's strategic culture "can be assessed, compared and analysed by means of a paradigm that represents them as a hierarchy of concepts on several levels: political, strategic, and operational" (Klein, 1991: 3). A country's security culture is often formed by the strategic preferences of the entire society and political elites on some policies and actions that are different from other countries (Duffield, 1999). "We witness that Indians may or may not be secular, may or may not want a Hindu nation, but they all unanimously want to get ahead, they want the country to progress and in peace – without lynching or riots" (Chaudhry, 2015). It is in this context that India's knowledge economy would appear to have a great potential to fulfil New Delhi's global ambitions.

The Restraints

"The measure of a country's strategic depth is examined not only by the importance it carries at the international level but also how it conducts itself internally. Strategically a country is only taken seriously at the international context if it is found to be equally robust in terms of addressing the issues and challenges internally. A continental sized country; India's external standing is undermined by the problems it faces internally. India's strategic ambition to be considered as a great power is thwarted by the dissent and conflict at home. India's most pressing strategic security concern is its own internal disunity" (Tanham, 2002: 24).

In spite of the great external success story, since the late 1980s the country has been fraying on the edges. There have been several full-blown separatist movements along its borders. "For the last one decade-and-half it is caught up in an internal insurgency in the form of Maoist uprising across the eastern, central and southern regions of the country" (Misra, 2002: 76). If in the external ambits contemporary Indian strategic culture is governed by the *Mandala* theory (as we discussed earlier), one could find its reflection in the internal arena as well. This is being pursued very vigorously in recent years. As a variation of that theory "the sovereign's enemy's friend is an enemy has been used very liberally to quash separatism and secessionism especially in the context of insurgency in the Punjab, Kashmir, the greater North-Eastern region" (Misra, 2001: 51).

A great power ambition requires great power responsibility. Does India have the required strength and wherewithal to address the internal challenges? Kautilya, in his formulation, cautioned against the use of continuous force against internal dissent. While the Indian state has been primarily hegemonic in its treatment of the dissenters, one could nonetheless identify a policy shift in the earlier full-blown military engagement against the internal adversaries. While it has not completely abandoned the military option the new preferred method seems to be rapprochement. Note, for instance, the ruling nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) decision to engage ex-separatists in the troubled province of Jammu and Kashmir in the provincial electoral politics.

While there has been a groundswell support for New Delhi that India be made a member of the United Nations Security Council by some of the important players in international relations such as the United States and United Kingdom at the same time they have voiced their concern about India's internal record. The issue of minority security, tolerance and ability to address dissent has featured time and again in Indian leadership's interaction with the heavyweights in the international arena (Dreher, 2015).

This would suggest, no matter how hard New Delhi positions itself in the international arena and how persistently the country presents itself as a strategic partner in ridding the world of global threats – from climate change to terrorism – it is going to land itself in the back if it does not address some of the pressing issues affecting the internal order and consequently its international image.

Even if India manages to sort out the internal problems there are other hurdles that it needs to address if it were to extend its remits of influence externally. While the *Rajamandala* theory is helpful a consistent and continuous treatment of the immediate neighbour as the natural and permanent *ari* (enemy) does not necessarily provide strategic depth to the country in the long run. India's current predisposition towards initiating a strategic dialogue with the international world seem to be wholly and squarely dominated by its monochromatic vision of its arch enemy (*i.e.* Pakistan).

Whatever India does or seeks to achieve at the international level seem to be guided by its reflection on Pakistan. The constant discussion on combating terrorism at the international level has its roots in India's inability to counter Pakistani designs in Indian territory. A country's strategic vision can only be termed dynamic if it succeeds in freeing itself from the shackles of such historic obsession. This would mean New Delhi rejig some of its policy planning in relation to Islamabad.

Pragmatic Ambiguities

While Kautilya weighs heavily in contemporary Indian strategic doctrine there are several oddities in New Delhi's power posturing. These ideas or worldviews do not necessarily gel well with the realist framework of international relations that Kautilya proposed and India seems to have embraced.

If one were to concentrate on those aspects that have contributed most to the shaping of Indian strategic thinking it is the civilizational inheritance, which would seem to dominate this discourse. In view of one critic, "strategic culture is made up of a country's worldview, judgment of subject-object relations and model of behaviours based on that country's geography, history and economic and political development" (Xinmin, 2014: 151). For more than any other component it is composite identity that has had a massive bearing on that thinking and continues to do so. India has always been a multi-religious state and various regimes for over millennia have tried to put their imprint on the country's strategic vision through the leadership's own specific outlook: hence, the continuation of a specific policy posture through the ages.

If history has contributed to the shaping of Indian strategic culture again it is this inheritance which underwrites India's resolve to provide a well-articulated vision. As one contemporary critic put it, "one striking feature of Indian discourse on peace and conflict has been its eclectic *weltanschaung*, which traditionally allows a fusion of divergent and often contrary view points" (Upadhyaya, 2009: 72).

New Delhi, ever since India's independence, has perpetually claimed it to be a nation that operates at the international scene by a code of conduct enshrined in the principles of *ahimsa* (non-violence), *panchasheel* (peaceful cooperation) and most importantly non-alignment. These defining principles in Indian strategic culture are not some mere afterthoughts but carefully constructed paradigms that have their origin in specific religious ethics and a product of its historical inheritance.

Turning to *ahimsa* we find it is not a theory that was invented by New Delhi by focussing astutely on contemporary international relations but was plucked up from its history. This is a principle that has been practiced by millions of Hindus, Buddhists and Jains from time immemorial. Thus while embracing non-violence as a policy principle New Delhi has simply borrowed an old concept and used it for the betterment of its strategic interests in contemporary international relations.

In India, it is believed that the spirituality and mysticism of the Hindu religion can bestow moral and logical legality upon India's international status (Xinmin, 2014: 153).

One could posit something similar on the principle of *panchasheel* – the idea of a peaceful coexistence with your neighbours. This ideal, popularised by India's first Prime Minister Nehru has its basis in the principles followed by one of India's foremost emperors whose reign predated Alexander the Great's invasion of India. Asoka is unique in ancient Indian strategic culture in the sense that his was a truly international empire. While he extended the physical frontiers of his state, as part of military expansionism, he was equally successful in enforcing the vision of good life in territories far beyond his.

Asoka's empire, which extended from modern day Myanmar in the East to Afghanistan in the West, was notable for maintaining friendly good relations with its neighbours. His empire was not only non-violent but equally non-interventionist. This principle of respect towards your neighbours in contemporary Indian diplomacy is a direct borrowing from Asokan emphasis on recognition and respect towards one's sovereign peers or neighbours. How did contemporary India combine the ideas of Kautilya and Asoka who sat in two extremes of their ideological positions?

According to one observer:

> "For much of the modern era, independent India's thinking on politics and international relations were derived not from the *Arthashastra* or similar works, but from the non-alignment and pacifism of Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi, who were perhaps loosely inspired by the example of Asoka, grandson of Kautilya's king. Asoka abjured realpolitik and attempted to run his empire on the principles of morality and peace (the Mauryan Empire fell apart quickly after Asoka's death) (Pillalamari, 2015: 19).

Apart from these acknowledged borrowing there have been several other discreet intervention by religion in shaping India's contemporary strategic thought. The most glaring yet not talked about aspect of this is the role of Islam or Muslim population towards New Delhi's policy postures. A citizenry with a Hindu majority, India nonetheless, cultivated a very vibrant and productive relationship with scores of Muslim states in Middle East for nearly half-a-century (from 1947-2002).

Its heavy energy dependence on the Middle Eastern oil and gas resources necessitated New Delhi to cultivate a friendly relation with the states in the region. It could win major concessions in its dependence by playing its role in hosting the second-major Muslim population in the world. This chunk of its citizenry (belonging to the Islamic faith), in other words, were show-cased whenever it went on a 'charm offensive' *vis a vis* Islamic nations in the Middle East. Interestingly, this reference to Islam in general and its Muslim population in particular, has been as much a blessing as a restraint in terms of achieving strategic objectives.

Its proximity to the Muslim nations in the Middle East implied, New Delhi follows the former's foreign policy objectives or risk ostracism and loss of concessionary oil and gas largesse. Therefore, to placate its own Muslim lobby and to be a good reliable partner to its Middle Eastern counterparts, New Delhi did not have diplomatic relations with for almost half-a-century. Its strategic autonomy, in other words, was hamstrung by the religious components of the society and the external environment. Yet, that has not guaranteed a long-term strategic depth to New Delhi in the region. A case in point is Iran's return from international isolation.

When Teheran was under a Western economic blockade New Delhi actively pursued several high-profile trade initiatives (notably iron-for-oil agreement). India was severely criticised for doing business with a pariah regime at the time and New Delhi felt it could weather that wrath by winning over Tehran by entering into an all-weather partnership programme. Iran's return from international isolation in early 2016, however, saw Tehran unilaterally cancelling many of the earlier deals with New Delhi (the accusation here was India took unfair advantage when Iran was on its knees). To add insult to injury, in the very first week of its emergence from the blockade Iran entered into several high-profile arms, economic and trade agreements with China while completely ignoring India.

The principle of non-alignment to which New Delhi was wedded firmly is yet another point in the discussion surrounding the religious ethos and the country's external strategic policy postures. By remaining true to the principles of non-alignment, India gained massive economic and moral dividend in a Cold War dominated international relations. However, it was precisely because of its reliance on this specific principle with its roots in Hindu belief in neutrality that undermined the country from evolving into a more powerful nation.

Yet, in view of one critic, "the modern Indian concept of non-alignment itself may be a reflection of Kautilya's advice for a nation to only follow its self-interest and not get locked into permanent enmity or friendship with any other nation" (Pillalamari, 2015: 19). When confronted by hard realities and challenges at an international arena, India has dug deep into its moral reserve of its great pacifist leaders. This trait is evident, more than ever, in the "strategic speak" of the current government. India's current Prime Minister never fails to use the stock phrases like Asoka, Akbar, Buddha and Gandhi when trying to place India in the broader international context or to chart the course of its strategic initiative.

Conclusion

Kautiulya's *Arthashastra* did not deal with "a particular state in a historical time, but with the state as a concept" (Rangarajan, 1992: 542). Therefore the theoretical framework offered by Kautilya not only has a timeless appeal, but it is also primarily secular in its orientation. It is these twin aspects, which have allowed the Indian

state to appropriate parts of this treatise in its foreign policy undertakings and consequently the overall strategic vision. Recognising the contribution of *The Arthashastra* in general, and *Rajamandala* theory in particular, Shiv Shankar Menon, the 4th National Security Advisor of India (2010-2014) acknowledged, that this treatise "is a serious manual on statecraft, on how to run a state, informed by a higher purpose, clear and precise in its prescriptions, the result of practical experience of running a sate. It is not just a normative text but a realist description of the art of running a state" (Menon, 2012: 13).

Kautilya's depiction of the external world, from the viewpoint of a sovereign, as an anarchical world marked by internecine struggle for power, it is a state of affairs where various polities push their national interests, and it is a world where entities enter into diplomatic alliances either to avoid aggression or gain strategic advantage in a hostile situation are the constants that have remained timeless.

Guided by these realities New Delhi has remained close to Kautilya's prescription of statecraft. "While at one level it pursues the ambition of *chakravartin* (world conquest) through soft power export it has also been realistic by staying true to Kautilya's prescriptions on seeking peace with other sovereign entities as the true foundation of lasting internal security and stability" (Upadhyaya, 2009: 73).

Prior to the rise of Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Indian strategic thinking, was primarily *ad hoc* in nature. As George T. Tanham argued in his 2002 essay, in the past, Indians "did not address the problems seriously until a real crisis arises" (Tanham, 2002: 82). Interestingly, "after the end of the Cold War, India has begun to apply more of the *Arthashastra*'s maxims as it has grown in confidence and ability and realized the necessity of pursuing its own interests, regardless of their normative component" (Pillalamarri, 2015: 19). Under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi there has been a rethinking on future Indian strategic culture. Confident, externally oriented, self-assured in the changed circumstances the signature of this strategy seems to be both militarily robust and expansionist in the soft power context.

References

Bhutta, Zafar (2015). "India bid to halt Pakistan project fails". *The Express Tribune*, 31 August. Available at http://tribune.com.pk/story/947720/india-bid-to-halt-pakistan-projects-fails/.

Blochmannand, H. (trans.) (1993) (reprint). *Ain-i-Akbari by Abul Fazal Allami*. Calcutta: The Asiatic Society.

Boesche, R. (2002). *The First Great Political Realist: Kautilya and his Arthashastra*. Maryland: Lexington Books.

Chaundhry, Lakshmi (2015). "A blow to saffron nationalism?". *Al Jazeera*. Available at http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/11/blow-saffron-nationalism-151119072839913.html.

Chaturvedi, Rajeev Ranjan (2015). "Modi's Visit to Mongolia: A Strategic Foray?". *ISAS Brief* nº378. Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies. Available at http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/ISAS%20Reports/ISAS%20Brief%20No.%20378%20-%20Modi's%20Visit%20to%20Mongolia.pdf.

Dreher, Arielle (2015). "India's Christians concerned about growing attacks on religious minorities". *The Washington Post*, 27 May. Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/indias-christians-concerned-about-growing-attacks-on-religious-minorities/2015/05/27/708c54c0-04a3-11e5-93f4-f24d4af7f97d_story.html.

Dowerah, Simantik (2015). "Modi at Wembley live: India doesn't want favours from the world, seeks equal stature, says PM". *F.India*. Available at http://www.firstpost.com/world/modi-at-wembley-live-india-doesnt-want-favours-from-the-world-seeks-equal-stature-says-pm-2505362.html.

Duffield, John S. (1999). "Political Culture and State Behavior". *International Organisation* nº 4, pp. 765-803.

Gautam, P. K. (2013) "The Relevance of Kautilya's Arthashastra". *Strategic Analysis* nº 1, pp. 21-28.

Gupta, Arvind (2014). "Need for a Modern *Arthashastra*". *The New Indian Express*, 14 April. Available at http://www.newindianexpress.com/columns/Need-for-a-Modern-Arthashastra/2014/04/14/article2166746.ece.

India Today (2015). "PM Modi at ASEAN Summit: It's India's turn now to do its bit for Asia's resurgence". *India Today*. Available at http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/modi-in-malaysia-live-address-asean-india-east-asia-summits/1/528137.html.

Johnston, Allastair Iain (1995). "Thinking about Strategic Culture". *International Security* nº 4, pp. 32-64.

Jones, Rodney W. (2006). *India's Strategic Culture*. Washington, DC: Defence Threat Reduction Agency.

Karad, Satish (2015). "Perspectives of Kautilya's Foreign Policy: An Ideal of State Affairs". *Modern Research Studies* nº 2, pp. 322-332.

Kautilya (L.N. Rangarajan, ed.), (1992). *The Arthashastra*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Klein, Yitzhak (1991). "A Theory of Strategic Culture". *Comparative Strategy* nº 1, pp. 3-23.

Menon, Shiv Shankar (2012). "India Needs to Develop Its Own Doctrine for Strategic Autonomy". *Economic Times*, 18 October. Available at http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2012-10-18/news/34555557_1_strategic-autonomy-shiv-shankar-menon-india-today.

Miglani, Sanjeev (2016). "Exclusive – U.S., India consider joint patrols in South China Sea: U.S. official". *Reuters*, 10 February. Available at http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-southchinasea-india-usa-idUKKCN0VJ09S?feedType=RSS&feedName=topNews.

Misra, Amalendu (2001). "The Politics of Secessionist Conflict Management in India". *Journal of Contemporary Security Policy* nº2, pp. 49-68.

Misra, Amalendu (2002). "Subaltern and the Civil War: An Assessment of Left-wing Insurgency in South Asia". *Civil Wars* nº4, pp. 56-76.

NDTV (2015). "UN's Decision to Mark Yoga Day Shows India's Soft Power". *NDTV*, 22 June. Available at http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/uns-decision-to-mark-yoga-day-shows-indias-soft-power-sushma-swaraj-774031.

NDTV (2016). "UAE Warns India: 'You're Not Immune to ISIS'". *NDTV*, 08 February. Available at http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-not-immune-to-isis-threat-says-uae-minister-1275040.

No author (2015). "Why Modi Matters". *Time*, 18 May.

Pillalamarri, Akhilesh (2015). "Chanakya: India's Truly Radical Machiavelli". *The National Interest*, January. Available at http://nationalinterest.org/feature/chanakya-indias-truly-radical-machiavelli-12146.

Roy, Kaushik (2013). "Kautilya" in Daniel Coetzee and Lee W. Eysturlid (eds.), *Philosophers of War: The Evolution of History's Greatest Military Thinkers*. Denver, CO: Praeger.

Sarkar, Benoy Kumar (1919). "Hindu Theory of International Relations". *The American Political Science Review* nº 3, pp. 400-414.

Singh, Mahendra Pratap (2011). "Kautilya: Theory of State" in Mahendra Pratap Singh and Himanshu Ray (eds.), *Indian Political Thought: Themes and Thinkers*. New Delhi: Pearson.

Snyder, Jack (1977). *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations*. Washington, DC: RAND Corporation.

Tanham, George T. (1992). "Indian Strategic Culture: An Interpretative Essay". Washington: RAND. Available at http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2007/R4207.pdf.

The Business Standard (2015). "Proud, bold and on the prowl – the India Africa Forum Summit lion". *The Business Standard*, 13 August. Available at http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/proud-bold-and-on-the-prowl-the-india-africa-forum-summit-lion-115081301043_1.html.

The Times of India (2015). "India, Vietnam agree to scale up defence cooperation". *The Times of India*, 26 May. Available at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/India-Vietnam-agree-to-scale-up-defence-cooperation/articleshow/47432289.cms.

Upadhyaya, Priyankar (2008). "Peace and Conflict: Reflections on Indian Thinking". *Strategic Analysis* nº 1, pp. 71-33.

Xinmin, Sui (2014). "*India's Strategic Culture and Model of International Behaviour*. China Institute of International Studies. Available at http://www.ciis.org.cn/english/2014-06/25/content_7007616.htm.