

KAUTILYA'S MANDALA THEORY

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Abstract

One of the greatest political thinkers of India and perhaps the world, Kautilya made a crowning contribution to political science in the Arthashastra, a complete manual on how to run a functional country. In foreign policy, the ancient scientist espoused a now famous concept known as the 'mandala theory', which helps the king identify who is friend and who is foe and act accordingly. In this paper, the concept of the mandalas will first be expounded upon, and then how they were meant to apply will be discussed. Lastly, whether the metric may be applied to the present times will be considered.

Research Questions

The questions forming the subject of this paper are as follows:

1. What is the Mandala theory?
2. How did Chanakya envision dealing with the States falling under the different Mandalas?
3. Are Chanakya's principles still applicable to modern diplomacy?

Introduction: The Arthashastra

There is little documented evidence on the life of Chanakya. His legend arises out of four distinct accounts identified by Thomas Trautmann: a Buddhist version contained in the *Mahavamsa*, a Jain version in the *Parishishtaparvan*, a Kashmiri version in the *Kathasaritsagara* and *Brihat-Katha-Manjari*, and a version by the Sanskrit poet Vishakhadatta in his play *Mudrarakshasa*.¹ In all four, however, his ultimate actions are common: he dethrones the Nanda dynasty and installs Chandragupta Maurya on the throne, beginning the age of the Mauryan Empire. Of particular interest and greatest reliability are the Buddhist and Jain legends; the former is dated between 500s-600s CE and the latter anywhere from 100s-800s CE. The Jain version has been contended to be older and more consistent than its

counterpart.² It has been generally agreed that he lived around 300 BCE, as Chandragupta Maurya reigned approximately from 321–297 BCE.³

There is no disputing the fact that Chanakya's crowning work was the *Arthashastra* (The Science of Wealth), his comprehensive treatise on economy, politics, law, military strategy, and diplomacy. Dated somewhere between 200 BCE and 300 CE,⁴ it is likely to be the compiled work of several authors.⁵ However, Kautilya is credited as the author, and is likely to have been the main driving force. The text was considered lost after the 12th century, until a Tamil Brahmin presented the Mysore Oriental Library with a palm-leaf manuscript in 1905.⁶ The librarian Rudrapatna Shamasastri translated and published the text in an ongoing project from 1905 to 1909, as instalments in the *Mysore Review* and *Indian Antiquary*. In 1960, R.P. Kangle published a critical translation by collating all the available manuscripts and smoothing out discrepancies.⁷ Shamasastri's and Kangle's interpretations remain the most authoritative, though numerous others have been since published.

The four great aims of life in India have been identified as *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama*, and *Moksha*: duty, wealth, pleasure, and salvation.⁸ Kautilya says that 'The source of the livelihood of men is wealth'. The aim of pursuing economics is to enable the acquisition of wealth and revenue by the State. However, a king who acts unjustly towards his own people is liable to invite their wrath. Therefore, he opines that the kingdom should function in a way that balances the welfare of the people and the augmentation of the treasury.⁹

The work is divided into three distinct parts spread out across 15 books: The Manual of Administration which lays out how the State is to be organized and how duties are to be distributed among its officials, the Code of Law and Justice covering civil and criminal law and prescribing various offences and their punishments, and the Manual of Foreign Policy covering techniques of diplomacy, espionage, subterfuge, and warfare. The three represent the _____

² Thomas R. Trautmann, *Kautilya and the Arthashastra: a statistical investigation of the authorship and evolution of the text* 29 (1971).

³ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, *Chanakya*, March 28, 2019, available at <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Chanakya> (Last Visited on September 23, 2021).

⁴ Patrick Olivelle, *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India: Kautilya's Arthashastra* 30-31 (2013).

⁵ *Id.* 24-25, 31-33.

⁶ Charles Allen, *Ashoka: The Search for India's Lost Emperor* (2012).

⁷ Trautmann, *supra* 1.

⁸ L.N. Rangarajan, *The Arthashastra* (1992).

⁹ *Id.* 2.

three prongs of Statecraft: a prosperous and well-managed State dispensing justice to its people and expanding its territory and influence. The purpose of expansion of territory is to augment the revenue flows to the treasury, which can then be used for further conquests.¹⁰

The Mandala Theory

Kautilya deals with the Mandalas in the final Manual of his work, which covers foreign policy. At any times, the king may be taking one of two actions: he may be consolidating his existing strength, or moving for the enlargement of his kingdom. To do these, he may choose an active or passive method; that is, he can elect for non-interventionist enjoyment of the continuing fruits of his past actions, or take up new initiatives for completion.¹¹ Success will lead to his gain, enabling him to progress relative to his allies and his enemies. Failure will backfire, weakening him and lowering his esteem on the international stage.¹²

Kautilya holds that the natural state for any two States sharing a border is hostility as each attempts to usurp the other's power. However, the degree of enmity may vary; some may even turn to friendship and later vassalhood (the purpose of Kautilyan foreign policy was always the acquisition of territory and revenue, so a vassal paying tribute and providing territorial access was the next best thing to directly conquered lands).¹²

In the Mandala, the king in whose respect the diagram is constructed is considered the 'conqueror', as he wishes to expand his influence and dominate the others around him by hook or by crook. He has his own circle of allies, of antagonists and enemies, and of those neutral or uninvolved. To expand his influence, the king utilizes power, which is to a great extent military. However, Acharya Chanakya does not shy away from giving a comprehensive definition of the term by also including moral, economic, and intellectual strength; it is considered to be progress when the king establishes new forts, but also when he opens new trading routes or mines, or builds works of irrigation. He may also gain power by establishing new settlements.¹¹ He also makes a distinction between 'fortune' and 'policy': progress or decline due to acts of god or accident is mere fortune, while human actions govern whether a policy will be beneficial or harmful.

¹⁰ *Id.* 20.

¹¹ *Id.* 518.

¹² *Id.* 516.

The Players of the Mandalas

Kautilya has provided a comprehensive list of potential players the king may encounter in the realm of foreign policy. All of them are arranged into ‘mandalas’, or concentric circles around the conqueror, who is the king for whose benefit the precepts of policy laid down in the Arthashastra are to be applied; quite simply, he is the subject of the book’s recommendations. There are four prominent members of the Mandala:

1. The *Ari*, or antagonist. The *Ari* is any kingdom which shares a border with the conqueror.¹³ Among them, the potent antagonist having vast resources and strength is an immediate enemy or *Shatru*. The one who has been affected by flaws in his State’s constituents and has a tottering foundation is a vulnerable antagonist. One who is weak is a destroyable antagonist. A weak antagonist with support from a stronger party may be weakened or harassed. Among the *Aris*, the natural enemy is the one who is of equally high birth compared to the *Vijigishu* (conqueror) or belongs to his family. An enemy by intent is one who acts against the conqueror or has been goaded into opposing him.¹³
2. The *Mitra*, or ally. Any State that does not share a border with the *Vijigishu* but does share a border with the *Ari* is in Kautilya’s conception a potential ally. A natural ally is a king who is of similar birth to the king or a member of his family; thus, when put in the sphere of friendship, a family member is not a sure enemy but a stout ally. Similarly, an ally by intent is one who requires the conqueror’s aid, and thus can be made into an asset.¹⁴
3. The *Madhyama*, or middle king. He shares a border with both the *Vijigishu* and the *Ari*. He is stronger than both individually and may help or destroy either with the correct incentives.
4. The *Udasin*, or neutral king. He does not share a border with the conqueror, his enemy, or the *Madhyama*, and is outside the area of hostilities. He is powerful enough to help or destroy all three.

¹³ *Id.* 520.

¹⁴ *Id.* 521.

Enemies and allies can additionally be divided on the basis of direction: those in the direction of conquest are considered to be in the ‘front’, while the others are considered to belong in the ‘rear’. This includes those directly behind him as well as those on the two flanks.¹⁵ An enemy in the rear is known as the *Parshnigraha*, while an ally in the rear is known as the *Aakranda*.

The 72 Elements of Foreign Policy

The *Vijigishu*, *Mitra*, and *Mitra-mitra* (ally of the ally) form the fundamental alliance that is the first circle of diplomacy. Each of these have six elements within (the Kautilyan *Saptanga* minus the ally): the king (*Swami*), the ministers (*Amatya*), the people and the countryside (*Janapada*), the fortified cities (*Durg*), the treasury (*Kosh*), and the army (*Dand*). These together form the eighteen elements of the circle. The *Ari*, the *Madhyama*, and the *Udasin* all similarly have a circle of eighteen elements. Thus, in total, there are seventy-two such constituents when dealing with any particular case of foreign policy, composed of twelve kings:

1. Conqueror
2. Enemy
3. Ally
4. Enemy’s Ally
5. Ally’s Ally
6. Enemy’s Ally’s Ally
7. Middle King
8. Neutral King
9. Middle King’s Ally
10. Neutral King’s Ally
11. Middle King’s Ally’s Ally
12. Neutral King’s Ally’s Ally

There is one other component of foreign policy known as the *Antardhi*, or the intervening king. He is a weak king who lies between the conqueror and the enemy. He is usually not relevant and only becomes a threat when he has a strong fort or forest to seek refuge in.¹⁶

¹⁵ *Id.* 524.

¹⁶ *Id.* 525.

Each of these individual elements, including the States as a whole as well as their individual constituents, can be made targets in the diplomatic game.

Types of Antagonists and Allies

Kautilya has divided both *Aris* and *Mitras* into various kinds based on their characteristics. Though the former are always potential enemies and the latter potential allies, their exact nature is very relevant in determining the policy route to be taken with them.

Among the neighbours, there may be those with an inimical disposition (*Aribhavi*), those who are friendly (*Mitrabhavi*) and those bound by vassalage (*Bhrityabhavi*).¹⁷

The *Aribhavi* enemies are as follows:

1. One always intent on harming the *Vijigishu*;
2. The *Parshnigraha* allied with the enemy in the front;
3. A vulnerable enemy who has suffered a catastrophe;
4. One who takes advantage of the *Vijigishu*'s calamity and attacks him.

The *Mitrabhavi* neighbours are these:

1. One who undertakes a campaign simultaneously with the conqueror in pursuit of the same objective;
2. One who takes part in a simultaneous campaign with a different objective;
3. One who joins his forces with the conqueror in a joint campaign;
4. One who starts a campaign as part of a treaty with the *Vijigishu*;
5. One who independently undertakes a campaign that helps the *Vijigishu*;
6. One who joins the conqueror's revolt;
7. One who trades in troops and materiel with the conqueror;
8. One who pursues friendship with the conqueror and enmity with his enemies.¹⁸

The *Bhrityabhavi* neighbours have the following forms:

¹⁷ Kajari Kamal, *Kautilya's Arthashastra: Indian Strategic Culture and Grand Strategic Preferences*, Journal of Defence Studies, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2018).

¹⁸ Rangarajan, *supra* 521.

1. A neighbour with territory between the conqueror and his enemy who is under threat of attack from the adversary;
2. Kings who can threaten the enemy's flanks and rear;
3. The vulnerable *Parshnigraha* of a strong enemy;
4. One who has submitted voluntarily to the *Vijigishu's* rule;
5. One who has been subjugated by force of arms into service of the conqueror.¹⁹

Likewise the *Mitras* can also be divided into dangerous allies and worthy allies. The dangerous allies are those with whom it is challenging to conclude an alliance. Additionally, even when concluded, they are very likely to break the friendship. These include those who have attacked another ally or deserted a past alliance due to weakness or greed, and also those who do not help their own allies in their calamities due to fear, contempt, or laziness.²⁰ On the other hand, worthy allies are easy to ally with and endure in friendship through thick and thin. *Mitra* States who have toiled for the good of their alliances in the past and who are worthy of respect are considered to be good allies. It may also be possible to snatch away dissatisfied allies from the friendship of the enemy, such as those who are estranged due to a misunderstanding, or who have not been honoured adequately.²¹

At this point it is to be noted that whenever Kautilya uses the terms *Ari* and *Mitra* to describe neighbours and non-neighbours, these necessarily should be qualified with the term 'potential'. It is as possible for a neighbour to be friendly as it is for a non-neighbour to be inimical. However, Kautilya believed that it is the natural state of nations who share territorial borders to be in conflict, since it is impossible for any of them to extend their territory and influence in that direction without the other party reducing in the same. At the same time, kingdoms that do not share borders with the *Vijigishu* are naturally predisposed to be his friends as they have no conflict of interest with him but may have conflict with his enemies and opponents.

¹⁹ *Id.*
523. ²⁰
Id. 566.
²¹ *Id.*
567.

The Six Tools of Foreign Policy and The Four Methods of Control

Kautilya mentions six methods of foreign policy to be applied to the Mandalas to bring about the *Vijigishu's* progress and the decline of his enemies.²² These are known as the *Shadguna Siddhanta*,²³ and are as follows:

1. Peace (*Samdhi*): Entering into an agreement with the other nation. Peace is to be used when the enemy and the conqueror are co-equal in strength, or are both declining or progressing at the same rate. The *Vijigishu* should make peace when he anticipates making progress from his consolidation of such a nature that would enable him to outstrip and destroy his enemy, or when the confidence generated by the peace would bring him more revenue and less loss than waging war. He may also make peace when he feels he may destroy the enemy's *Saptanga* or alienate his allies by secret means, or when he needs time to recover from a calamity or subdue another enemy.
2. War (*Yana*): Waging war by overt martial action. The conqueror shall take recourse to outright war when he is confident in his superiority over the enemy, whether due to superior armies or impregnable defences. He can also exploit the enemy's distraction with a conflict elsewhere to conquer a part of his land.²⁴
3. Indifference (*Asana*): Often, the best diplomatic action is to do nothing and continue to consolidate your gains. The conqueror may take this route where neither he nor his enemy can harm each other, or when the enemy is too distracted by a calamity of any sort to act against him. It is also a prudent course where the enemies are fighting amongst each other, allowing them to be weakened while the conqueror increases his strength.
4. Preparing for war (*Vigraha*): Making preparations for war is an expensive step, and should only be taken where the king is sure of his ability to repel any assault and bear

²² *Id.* 527.

²³ The Editors of GK Today, *Kautilya's Concept of Raja Mandala {Mandala Doctrine} and Shadguna in Foreign Policy*, October 14, 2016, available at <https://www.gktoday.in/topic/kautilyas-concept-of-raja-mandala-and-shadguna-in-foreign-policy/> (Last visited on October 15, 2021).

²⁴ *Id.* 528, 529.

the expenditure. This creates pressure on the enemy due to the mobilization of forces and the threat of war, and compels him to accede to the wishes of the *Vijigishu*.

5. Alliance (*Samsraya*): When the conqueror feels his position to be in danger due to an inability to attack the enemy or protect himself, he may by alliance seek the protection of a stronger king. He will use this opportunity to halt his decline and begin progressing in strength, before eventually regaining his independence.²⁵
6. Double-dealing (*Dvaidhibhav*): When the king finds himself unable to fight a war on two fronts, he shall pursue a policy of making peace with one *Ari* while waging war with another. This shall enable him to consolidate his resources towards solving one problem at a time.

When a choice is given between *Samdhi* and *Yana*, peace is to be preferred, as war causes disadvantages such as loss of life and revenue. Similarly, *Asana* is preferable to *Vigraha*. Between *Samsraya* and *Dvaidhibhav*, however, the latter is preferable as it leaves the conqueror free to pursue his own goals, while seeking the support of a stronger king binds him to his wishes until he can break free.²⁵ The king who can understand the proper use and interplay of these tools will make all the Mandalas dance like puppets in whatever way he pleases.

Similarly, in dealings where the conqueror has to cajole the other party into doing something that will benefit him, Kautilya has provided four methods of control to be employed in ascending order of difficulty and efficacy. The weak should be controlled with more straightforward methods, while the strong should be targeted with more powerful tools. They are as follows:

1. Conciliation (*Sama*): Convincing the opponent using oratory skill or benefits not in the nature of bribes. This includes protecting their villages and cattle, handing enemies of the opposing king over to him, guarding his trade routes, and proposing terms of alliance and peace.
2. Gifts (*Dana*): Providing material benefits in lieu of service. This includes providing land, money, or prostitutes to please the opposing party, as well as the promise of securing his person, wealth, and rule from harm in lieu of his aid.

²⁵ *Id.* 530.

3. Dissension (*Bhed*): Sowing discord in the ranks of the enemy. This can be accomplished by means such as alienating the opponent's allies from him, pitting officials against each other using bribes, secret agents, or prostitutes, conducting false flag operations using the secret service, and sowing mistrust in the hearts of the enemies for each other.
4. Force (*Dand*): The ultimate and last resort of open conflict. This entails killing or capturing the enemy using overt war or secret missions, capturing his forts or territory, or ruining his economic undertakings. If the conqueror is strong enough, this method is guaranteed to work.

Applying these methods in a deviant or opposite order is called *Viloma*, while the correct order is termed *Anuloma*. Kautilya is of the opinion that applying more potent methods to weaker enemies is a waste of resources and is not recommended unless exceptional circumstances necessitate it.

Conclusion: The Continuing Relevance of Kautilya

Many people are of the opinion that Kautilya's Mandala theory is outdated in modern times. Indeed, on the face of it that appears to be the case: what is the relevance of territorial contiguity in an age of navies that can span intercontinental distances, the internet, and air power? In a new age of global cooperation, is it really proper to look at our closest neighbours as potential enemies? However, in the author's view, these people miss the core points of the thoughtful and enlightening discourse contained in the Arthashastra.

The concept of territory laid down might seem outdated on the surface, but what is the core concept of territory as used in Mandalas? The territory describes nothing more than the direct sphere of influence of a State. In the past, it was limited to the physical limits of the country. Today the territory is also expressed in the percentage of users on the internet, in the force projection spheres of aircraft carriers, in ICBM and fighter jet ranges, and in satellite coverage. Nevertheless, the basic principle is the same: whenever two spheres of interest collide anywhere in the world, the situation is naturally predisposed to conflict. On the other hand, lack of disputed interests and the presence of common enemies creates conducive atmospheres for cooperation and alliances. In fact, even the traditional and literal readings of Kautilya's prescriptions find use in the modern world. One need only look to India and its relations with

its neighbours for an example; in each context, clear *Aris*, *Mitras*, *Udasins*, and sometimes *Madhyamas* and even *Antardhis* will reveal themselves.

Similarly, the ideals of a globalized world have not prevented the rise of conflicts that perhaps resemble in a substantial way those seen by Kautilya at the time of writing his magnum opus; an increasing push for seemingly cooperative behaviour does not take away the fundamentally egoist and selfish objects of all States which are to ensure its own survival and prosperity. The frequent diplomatic skirmishes at the UN, trade wars, espionage operations, and even proxy wars attest to this fact; just because a society is moving away from overt war does not mean conflict dies. It merely mutates into new forms that ultimately follow many of the same precepts as the old dogma. As long as humans remain humans, the utility of conflict-based understanding of foreign affairs will never die out, and the Arthashastra is perhaps one of the most comprehensive works on this subject in human history. Its relevance is here to stay for a long, long time.

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