



The Truth of Kautilya's Relevance Today: Critically Assessing Contemporary India's Neighborhood Policy

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Abstract:

The significance of Kautilya in India's foreign policy has been highly reiterated. This non-western political thought has been highly emphasized after the rise of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India. The '*Raja Mandala*' theory, which describes the immediate neighbor as an enemy, has been focused on explaining the geopolitical situation for India. However, it is essential to understand that India's neighborhood is not only filled with foes but also friends. Thus, by analyzing the genesis of India's neighborhood policy in contemporary times and its impact on the neighboring countries in South Asia, the study puts the idea of the *Raja Mandala* to test. Nevertheless, the study concludes that the implication of Kautilyan ideas has led to the securitization of neighborhood and negatively impacted the South Asian neighbors. The study believes that the Kautilyan idea is Machiavellian; thus, the theoretical or practical application is ambiguous and ambivalent.

Keywords: India; South Asia; Neighborhood policy; Kautilya; *Raja Mandala*

Introduction

The understanding of the International Relations (IR) as a discipline has not been 'international' (Acharya, 2016). The IR as an academic discipline has been primarily dominated by western philosophy, specifically European ideas. The failure of the Western philosophies to comprehend some of the ongoing phenomena in the non-West part of the globe have called for the non-western or eastern philosophies (Acharya and Buzan, 2010). A great emphasis has been made on the significance of the non-Western philosophies in understanding what and how things are going in *other* parts of the world. The cry of non-western philosophies primarily arises when the analysts talk about India and China. The rise of both the countries in Asia has made the academicians, analysts, and strategists focus on the non-western or indigenous theories.

However, 'Has there been a hurriedness?' in employing the non-western philosophies with proper theorization, 'Has there been a mistake in implication?' or 'Is it just a Western blindness?' The answer to these questions is pertinent. None of the non-western IR theories can be directly

implied to understand strategies and processes. They have to be timely modified and should have situational alteration. Although said to be different from Western philosophies, the non-western philosophies have more considerable similarities (Acharya and Buzan, 2010). The ancientness of the non-western philosophies cannot be a justification for validity or accuracy. It is not about wholly rejecting or ignoring the non-western philosophies, but there has to be huge consideration and critical analysis about adhering to those ideas. Thus, this article calls for a critical assessment of the non-western political philosophy.

Kautilya (375 – 283 BC), who wrote the book '*Arthashastra*', is one of the philosophers in ancient India. His book is a collection of treaties or a training guide for King Chandra Gupta Maurya, who established the Maurya Dynasty (Bisht, 2020). Kautilya's philosophies include ideas on ruling and governance with an emphasis on the moral, legal, political, and economic virtues of a King (Bisht, 2020). The ideas of Kautilya influenced many rulers of ancient India. His ideologies on state, war, military, legitimacy, and others have been regarded as exceptional. His '*mandala theory*' is considered to be among very relevant theories. This theory

provides a leader with the idea of ‘enemies and allies’ in international politics (Karad, 2015). Many recent scholars have employed this theory to understand the politics in the neighborhood, particularly regional politics.

With the rise of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, who comes from a Hindu-nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), there has been a start of talks about the resurgence of Kautilyan theories (Bhatnagar and Passi, 2016). Kautilya has served as a non-traditional theoretical framework for understanding the foreign policy and bilateral relations of India (Bhattarai and Pulami, 2021). The policies forwarded by the Prime Minister have been tried to relate to the strategies of Kautilya. Whether it be conflict resolution tactics or neighborhood policy, Kautilya’s theories have been implied to study those strategies (Chowdhury, 2016). Not only have the Kautilyan theories and Narendra Modi’s strategies been correlated, but the Prime Minister himself has been personified as Kautilya several times (Bhattarai and Pulami, 2021). The ancient philosopher impacted political thoughts, but the study believes that a critical examination of those philosophies is necessary contemporarily.

However, the dynamic and pragmatic foreign policy of India would not be justified indeed through the traditional lens of Kautilya only. The narrow traditional concept cannot vindicate the evolution of India’s Neighborhood Policy till today. Therefore, an eclectic view of India’s Neighborhood Policy is required. The study’s primary aim is to critically assess the prominent discourse or understanding of New Delhi’s Neighborhood First Policy through Kautilya’s *Mandala* theory. By critically analyzing the two, the study attempts to establish the need for the proper academic theorization of the Kautilyan aspect before engaging it directly with the recent international political phenomena. The study has questioned the relevancy of the Kautilyan theory through the analysis of the Neighborhood policy. Overall, the article aims to inform the analysts about the direct implication of the non-western theory to the practice.

Method

As qualitative research, this study is based on material acquired primarily from secondary sources, including reports on the neighborhood policy, general ideas published in newspapers and magazines regarding Modi’s neighborhood policy, and scholarly studies on India’s neighborhood policy. The authors’ ability to analyze about the securitization of Indian foreign policy under Modi is based on their examination of reports released by Indian study centers, think tanks, and research centers. In addition to those, studies and analysis have been conducted on government reports, statistics, and speeches made by Indian leaders regarding their country’s neighborhood policy. It is concisely addressed how *Raja Mandala*’s ideology and Kautilyan statecraft affected Modi’s neighborhood strategy. Media sources are also reviewed for an understanding of various issues connected with India’s neighbourhood policy. The themes that emerged from the reviews are thematically analysed and interpreted.

Kautilya’s *Raja Mandala* theory

In Kautilya’s words, the mandala is the circle of states in spatial terms (Bisht, 2020). The *Mandala* theory posits a unique order of states for identifying one’s enemies and allies based on geographical proximity (Sharma, 2022). This categorization of foes and friends is also based on material strength and cognitive intentions. More inherently, the mandala theory provides directives in dealing with strong, weak, and neutral states (Sharma, 2022). According to Kautilya, there are twelve actors in the mandala theory, where five actors were considered primary or essential. The five independent actors are the conqueror (*vijigishu*), the ally (*mitra*), the enemy (*ari*), the Middle Kingdom (*Madhyama*), and the neutral state (*udasina*) (Bisht, 2020; Sharma, 2022). These individuals were crucial because they were facilitators for determining if diplomacy was successful.

By explaining the cognitive component that gives ‘friend’ or ‘enemy’ their respective meanings, one might attempt to understand the actors’ intentions (Modelski, 1964). The actor’s internal cohesion and drive, reflected in the qualities of the seven constituent aspects (the Saptang theory¹), were vital indicators in determining the actor’s aim (Modelski, 1964). Therefore, the closer a state was, the easier it was to recognize and understand its motive. Thus, a total of 72 elements made up the mandala, which was determined mathematically by accounting for the distinct characteristics of the state, its friends, adversaries, the neutral monarch, and the middle king (Bisht, 2020). The internal strength of the state gave its different identities as a “superior state” and an “inferior state,” in Kautilyan words (Sharma, 2022). If the state’s ability and influence decreased, it had to adjust to different circumstances to restore its relative influence in the mandala (Kamal, 2018). As a result, the circle of states was a dynamic entity that was susceptible to components of metamorphosis depending on state capability and impact (Kamal, 2018) (Fig. 1).

The mandala theory is based on the geopolitical supposition that the *vijigishu* (the potential conqueror state) is situated in the centre of the *Raja mandala*; its immediate neighbor is likely an enemy (*ari*); the state next to the immediate neighbor is the enemy of this neighbor and probably the *vijigishu*’s friend (*mitra*) (Vittal, 2011). A hostile state (*ari-mitra*) is positioned behind this friendly state, which is followed by a friendly state (*mitra-mitra*) (Karad, 2015). In line with the proximity of the regions, the theory states that “behind him (the king), the ally, the enemy’s ally, the ally’s ally, and the enemy’s ally’s ally are positioned in front; behind, the enemy in the rear, the rear enemy’s ally, and the near ally’s ally (one behind the other)” (Sharma, 2022). In Kautilya’s system, the person with the closest territory is the natural enemy, the person of equal birth is the enemy by birth, the person who is opposed to or in opposition is the enemy made (for the time being), and the person whose territory is separated from another territory is the natural ally (Bisht, 2020; Sharma, 2022).

1. The term “Saptang” denotes seven limbs, parts, or components. They form the body of the State as a whole. Kautilya listed the seven important state organs. They are Swami (The Ruler), Amatya (The Minister), Janapada (The People), Durga (The Fortified Capital), Kosha (The Treasury), Danda (The Army), and Mitra (Ally) (Modelski, 1964).

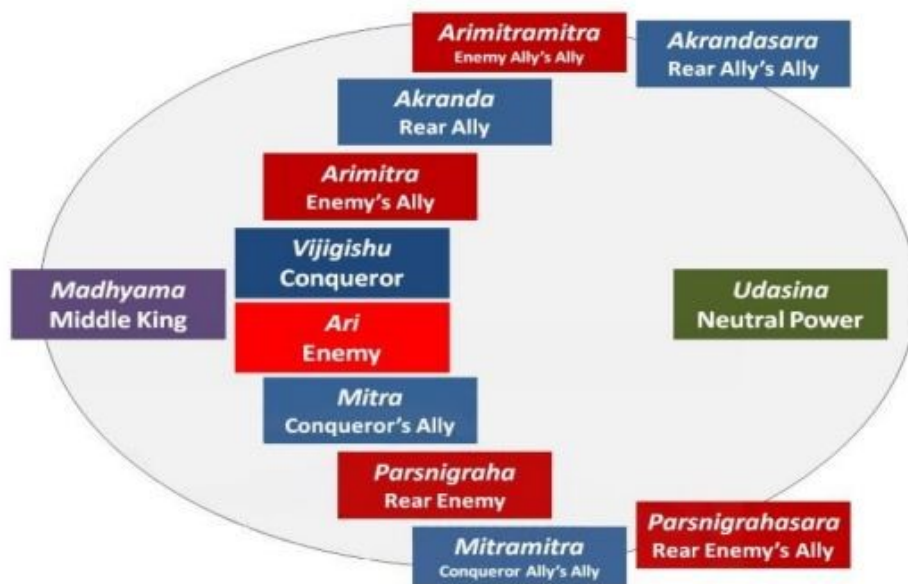


Figure 1. Kautilya's Raja Mandala Theory (Vittal, 2011).

These allies are further divided into two categories: allies made for the moment (those who have sought sanctuary in exchange for money or their lives) and allies by birth (those linked through the mother or father) (Modelski, 1964). Additionally, he contends that the intermediate king is the one who has territory next to that of the adversary and the conqueror, can aid them while they are unified or divided and subdue them when they are divided (Madhyama) (Kamal, 2018). Similar to this, some neutral kings exist outside of the realm of the enemy, the conqueror, and the middle king (Kamal, 2018). These kings are more potent than (their constituents) and can aid the enemy, the conqueror, and the middle king when they are united or not, as well as subdue them when they are not (Karad, 2015).

Returning to the *Mandala* idea, it is believed to assume that every neighboring nation is an enemy and that the adversary's enemy is a friend (Vittal, 2011). When examined from the perspective of a *vijigishu*, it is also understood as fundamentally an ideology of conflict and struggle and a cause of war (Bisht, 2020). According to the Kautilian theory of international relations, a ruler's first and most important duty is to protect the borders of his country and to enlarge its influence, power, and territory (Bisht, 2020). Therefore, the *vijigishu* must approach the concerns about how to handle interstate relations while keeping these distinct objectives in mind (Sharma, 2022). This is the fundamental tenet of Kautilya's mandala philosophy (Sharma, 2022).

India's neighborhood policy to neighborhood first policy

India's 'Neighborhood policy' has been the anchor point of India's overall foreign policy. The primary objective and the execution of this policy have differed according to the nature of the government; however, it has always been India's starting point of international engagement. When analyzing the genesis of neighborhood policy in India, from 'Neighborhood Policy' to 'Neighborhood First Policy', it

can be divided into four different categories based on the policy adaptation of the prime ministers of India.

The first phase was under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru's approach to South Asia can be termed a 'mixture of ignorance and optimism' (Malik, 2016). After independence, Nehru's security cooperation with his immediate neighbor continued, establishing the region's geopolitical and economic structure (Mohan, 2007). In essence, Nehru saw the subcontinent as a strategic and exclusive sphere of influence for New Delhi (Mohan, 2007). Nehru attempted to encourage democracy in Himalayan republics to pursue political pragmatism that was being thwarted by security interstates (Muni, 2015). However, Nehru aspired to create an "Eastern federation" comprising India and the major Asian countries with a 'broader vision of Asian unity and solidarity' (Scott, 2009). He had a "proclivity for taking smaller neighbors for granted" (Scott, 2009). New Delhi's strategic relevance was only recognized by Nehru in terms of 'ensuring peace and stability in its neighborhood (Malik, 2016).

Second, Indira Gandhi re-orientes the neighborhood policy of India and showed the assertive or realist nature of India. Indira Gandhi, Nehru's genuine successor, abandoned the 'family approach' to Indian neighborhood policy (Scott, 2009). Gandhi took decisive action to counterbalance her neighbors, and her diplomacy is credited with two key achievements (Sahoo, 2016). First, the inclusion of Sikkim under Indian sovereignty (eventually merged with India in 1975), and second, the liberation and independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan (Sahoo, 2016). Gandhi's conviction in the "Indian neighborhood", which was an exclusive zone of supremacy and dominance. She also sought to ensure that "no foreign power" was permitted to intervene in the region (Scott, 2009). India's Monroe theory, according to Mohan, is "buttressed by the principle of bilateralism" (Mohan, 2007). Gandhi's neighborhood policy was devised with the goal of "keeping foreign power away

from any kind of conventional influence on the regional security framework” (Malik, 2016).

On the other hand, her neighbourhood approach can be described as “not merely by idealism, not merely by sentimentalism, but by apparent thinking and hard-headed examination of the problem” (Scott, 2009). Indira Gandhi effectively changed South Asia’s geopolitical landscape (Malik, 2016). Indira Gandhi’s policies can be illustrated as the construction of sub-continental hegemony to protect against territorial wars (Scott, 2009). In general, the large state small state complex increased in the region during Indira’s tenure due to its aggressive nature. Likewise, regional integration has been over-placed by bilateralism.

Third, following Indira Gandhi’s assertive neighborhood engagement, the noteworthy ‘Neighborhood Policy’ was launched by I.K. Gujral, the Union Minister of External Affairs (who later became prime minister of India from April 1997-March 1998) (Scott, 2009). The Gujral Doctrine is a well-known doctrine that he implemented (Scott, 2009). The doctrine consists of five basic principles to approach India’s neighbors, which were:

- (a) India does not demand reciprocity from its neighbors Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, but instead gives and accommodates what it can in good faith and trust;
- (b) No country in South Asia should allow its territory to be used against the interests of another in the region;
- (c) No country should interfere in other’s domestic affairs;
- (d) All countries in South Asia must respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of each other;
- (e) Their disagreements must be resolved through peaceful bilateral dialogue (Muni, 2015).

India’s role in South Asia has been described as a contradiction between Perceived Hegemony and Reluctant Leadership (Sahoo, 2016). As a result, one may argue that Gujral’s endeavour is more in accordance with demonstrating regional leadership. Some key developments in the region had produced a “fear psychosis” against India among tiny states prior to India’s reorientation of its neighborhood strategy (Muni, 2015). For example, the 1987 India-Sri Lanka agreement has been accused of being used by India to demonstrate its military power in the region (Muni, 2015). The Gujral doctrine has reduced tensions and disputes between India and all of its neighbors for the first time in 50 years (Malik, 2016).

One of its distinguishing aspects is that it was launched without a strategic idea. The Gujral Doctrine, on the other hand, has been attacked for various reasons, although it is effective (Malik, 2016). Many claimed that by pushing such a concept, India sent the wrong signals to Pakistan (Juutinen, 2018). In fact, Pakistan’s leadership accused India of isolating Pakistan because the Gujral concept did not require reciprocity from any other South Asian country other than Pakistan (Juutinen, 2018). Atal Bihari Vajpayee, IK Gujral’s successor, focused his campaign on denouncing Gujral’s regional politics. The BJP-led federal government

abandoned the Gujral ideology. According to A.B. Vajpayee, India’s relations with its neighbors will be based on reciprocity (Mohan, 2007). This clearly shows that Prime Minister Vajpayee has debunked the Gujral idea, which was at best a political gimmick or an attempt to bolster his image as an Indian foreign policy expert (Mohan, 2007).

Fourth, Prime Minister Modi bucked the precedent by inviting all SAARC countries’ heads of state or heads of government to his swearing-in ceremony, a move widely seen as a dramatic shift in India’s foreign policy (Chowdhury, 2016). India’s neighborhood policy is that the country cannot project its power outside of South Asia unless it can manage its relations with its neighbors, whom all have asymmetrical connections with India due to its enormous population, military, geography, and economy (Chowdhury, 2016). Modi’s government reinstated the so-called “Neighborhood First Policy” based on this logic. The goal of this policy is to “strengthen regional forms like SAARC” and “pursue cordial connections” throughout the area. Given Modi’s decision to invite all SAARC leaders to the organization’s launch on 26 May 2014, his first trip outside of India, to Bhutan, illustrates his dedication to strengthening India’s regional ties before turning his attention to the rest of the world (Bhatnagar and Passi, 2016).

However, Modi’s reorientation of foreign policy to a neighborhood first policy faced challenges. India has shown lukewarm interest in South Asia’s regional integration (Bhatnagar and Passi, 2016). The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is the only regional organization that includes all of South Asia’s countries; however, it is currently in disarray (Kaura and Rani, 2020). The SAARC region still lacks an appropriate framework for discussing and resolving bilateral and terrorism-related issues. Similarly, India’s bilateral relations with most South Asian countries are strained. Since the split of India and Pakistan after independence, there has been a relationship crisis between the two countries over Kashmir (Rajagopalan, 2016). Under Modi, India’s connections with considerable powers have produced a situation for minor states in the region that is reminiscent of the Cold War (Bhattacharjee, 2016). Despite its role as a leader of the “non-alignment movement,” India had significant defence and economic ties with the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War, putting enormous pressure on small states in the region to choose sides (Bhatnagar and Passi, 2016). India’s closeness to the United States under the Modi regime has exacerbated this predicament (Chowdhury, 2016).

Equating Modi’s neighborhood first policy and Kautilya’s *Raja Mandala* theory

Today, India’s neighborhood is no longer just the little nations that are close by geographically; it also refers to the geopolitical reality that has updated the traditional meaning of neighborhood. Realizing the same transition, numerous Indian governments have announced their neighborhood strategies, with the emphasis being either on the security component or the regional integration and development aspect (Bhatnagar and Passi, 2016). However, after 2014, a fourth component-the so-called “Modi factor,” as some aca-

demics have dubbed it-began to impact the narrative of the Indian neighborhood strategy (Bhatnagar and Passi, 2016).

Narendra Modi's neighborhood policy toward the small states in South Asia is based on the region's deteriorating ties with Pakistan and China's expanding strategic footprint there, especially since 2014 (Bhattacharai, 2017). Here, Modi appropriately rediscovered the Kautilian statecraft's importance to India's neighborhood strategy (Bhattacharai and Pulami, 2021). Currently, India's neighborhood strategy under Modi is described as neo-Kautilian, driven by both of these elements: the offensive capability to confront China and the defensive capability to impede the Chinese operations in the neighborhood (Bhattacharai, 2017). Modi's neo-Kautilian politics, which are centered on India's national interest, national power, and national security, take into account South Asian geopolitics from *Raja Mandala's* discourse (Bhatia, 2016). The neo-Kautilian strategy works better under Modi's leadership since he has simultaneously securitized and economized India's foreign policy, which some experts believe is a continuation of the same inconsistencies (Bhatia, 2016). However, Modi's strategy is a noticeable break from the norm for the others, especially in how he incorporated Kautilya's *Raja Mandala* into his neighborhood policy (Bhatia, 2016).

At the core of Indian strategic theory is Kautilya's *Raja Mandala*, whose impact can be seen today in Modi's neighborhood policy (Kaura and Rani, 2020). In Modi's *Raja Mandala*, the Hobbesian theory of the universe is presented, with India as the potentially dominant state in South Asia (Singh, 2019). We may better comprehend India's neighborhood strategy from a South Asian geopolitical viewpoint as the Modi administration revitalizes Kautilya's *Raja Mandala* with the knowledge that India is surrounded by both friendly and unfriendly neighbors today (Bhatia, 2016). India's neighborhood policy is primarily to blame for transforming a friendly neighbor into a hostile neighbor when it comes to contrasting them. India's geopolitical position between the eastern and western reaches of the Indian Ocean, with the north being constrained by the Himalayas, has caused its foreign policy to become more securitized, which is consistent with the *Raja Mandala* perception, which has a greater degree of applicability in international politics (Bhattacharai, 2017). As a regional force in South Asia, Modi's India is currently experiencing issues similar to those of *vijigishu* (Bhattacharai, 2017).

Failure of India's neighborhood first policy

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's main foreign policy effort, the "neighborhood first policy," aimed to improve ties with the nation's neighbors. Since Modi's tough stance and increasing Chinese pressure have prevented the government from gaining supporters in the area, many people think that the policy has failed to move in a constructive direction (Behuria et al., 2012). The area has characterized the policy toward neighbors, particularly the tiny states, as hostile rather than cooperative. Additionally, the employment of coercive rather than social forces contributes to the rise of anti-Indian sentiment in the region (Ali, 2019). Growing anti-Indian sentiment in the area appears to have benefited

China, strengthening Beijing's ties with other South Asian countries (Ali, 2019).

In the early years of Modi's administration, regional organizations like SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) were given top priority, but the "neighborhood first policy" failed to have any positive effects, and instead, the nation found itself in competition with a much more aggressive China (Behuria et al., 2012). The domestic policies of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, which are criticized by some for being discriminatory against non-Hindu minorities, and attacks on press freedom have significantly worsened the situation and further estranged India from its neighbors (Chowdhury, 2016). Because of New Delhi's condescending attitude toward smaller neighbors like Nepal, the Maldives, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, SAARC member nations, New Delhi is "today struggling with multidimensional diplomatic issues" (Chowdhury, 2016).

India's regional strategy toward Pakistan abruptly changes as a result of the Kashmir area or Afghanistan, making New Delhi's foreign policy combative in nature. India has consistently charged Pakistan with funding an armed rebel organization that either desires complete merger of the disputed territory with Pakistan or independence from both Pakistan and India (Bhoothalingam, 2016). Afghanistan is a different battle that sets India against its neighbor Pakistan. The Taliban, a group that recently won control of Kabul after waging a protracted insurrection against the US-backed Afghan government, has long been supported by Islamabad (Juutinen, 2018). India has not also been able to deal with the Taliban situation in Afghanistan. Also, it has not been able to help the Afghan people in need, instead have imposed strict restrictions to the Afghan national who wish to travel to India.

Modi's three concessional credit lines on his first trip to Nepal, as well as India's aid and assistance following the 2015 Nepal earthquake, are also to be commended (Singh, 2016). To show its disapproval with Nepal's constitution, India slapped an economic blockade on the country in 2015, but this was a coercive measure (Ali, 2019). India has been contentious about the Chinese project in Nepal. Moreover, India has also secured its bilateral ties with Bhutan in light of the potential danger from China as well as the limitations on New Delhi's domestic security (Bhattacharai and Pulami, 2021). When Bhutan attempted to move closer to China in 2013, India manufactured an artificial energy crisis in Bhutan right before the election in an effort to sway the results and punish Bhutan (Bhattacharai and Pulami, 2021). One cannot completely rule out the impact of India's demonetization while analyzing India's neighborhood policy toward the two landlocked countries of Nepal and Bhutan in South Asia (Bhattacharai and Pulami, 2021).

Talking about Bangladesh, 22 agreements on security, connectivity, power, and trade were signed or extended during PM Modi's 2015 visit to Bangladesh (Bhattacharjee, 2016). The Modi administration approved the Land Boundary Agreement, which resolved conflicts between the two states. However, India is enraged by Bangladesh's growing relations to China (Bhattacharjee, 2016). Nevertheless,

there is India's unwillingness to settle some of the bilateral disagreements and alleged meddling in Bangladesh's domestic politics (Bhattacharjee, 2016). India carefully plans its policy toward its maritime neighbors in response, paying particular attention to China's growing engagement with Sri Lanka and the Maldives (Moorthy, 2020). India provides its maritime neighbors with economic and developmental support as a counterbalance to the expanding Chinese dominance in the region. During the 2015 Sri Lankan presidential elections, Maithripala Sirisena, a dependable Indian supporter and cabinet minister for Rajapaksa, defeated the latter to win the presidency of Sri Lanka (Bhattarai and Pulami, 2021). India was allegedly implicated in the overthrow of Sri Lanka's government. In COVID-19, India could not also play an important role that it should have played (Bhattarai and Pulami, 2021). However, India was more consumed by the idea of vaccine nationalism. The support that was promised to the neighbors was also not timely fulfilled by India creating huge medical/vaccine shortages in the neighbors like Nepal and Bangladesh.

The modification of the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy by PM Narendra Modi have shifted the interest of New Delhi to Southeast Asia than South Asia. The growing political, economic, and strategic countries with ASEAN countries depict the losing interest of India from this region and growing concerns over the booming economies in Southeast Asia and increasing strategic clout in the Indo-Pacific region (Kaura and Rani, 2020). Overall, although there have been successes of India's neighborhood first policies but several actions show that the policies towards the South Asian neighbors have been more pragmatic and Machiavellian in nature. The decreasing influence of India in the 'traditional sphere of influence' and souring relations with the neighbors have resulted failure of the neighborhood first policy of India (Kaura and Rani, 2020).

Is the essence of *Kautilya* relevant today? A critical outlook to securitization of neighborhood first policy through *Kautilya's Raja Mandala*

The Kautilian outlook that has been used to analyze or may be devise the neighborhood first policy have primarily securitized the neighborhood (Bhattarai and Pulami, 2021). The essence of *raja mandala* where the immediate neighbor is your enemy has primarily not benefitted the strategies towards the neighbors, especially the small ones (Biswas, 2020). India's realpolitik stance and responses towards the neighborhood draws its roots from Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (Kamal, 2018). The policies of economic coercion, subversion, populist discourse, infiltration, and artifice have been used by India. The amiable tenets of the "neighborhood first" policy, founded on the ideals of peaceful coexistence, have experienced inconsistencies, contradictions, and ad hoc behaviour, which is actually not in line with the tenets of the "neighborhood first" policy of Modi's Government (Mohan, 2007). This is because New Delhi has adopted a strategic and realist approach to its neighbors as a result of India's strategic and economic interests in the region (Bhattarai and Pulami, 2021).

Therefore, the value of the *Arthashastra* is translated by

Narendra Modi's "neighborhood first" policy into the practical, pragmatic, and intellectual use of power, inspired by knowledge and the greater cause of world peace (a blend of security and prosperity of the people) (Bhatia, 2016). However, Modi's application of the *Raja Mandala* idea in South Asia has secured its neighborhood strategy (Bhatia, 2016). *Raja Mandala's* argument holds that Modi's India has treated its neighbors with caution because it views them as enemies, particularly Pakistan and China (Bhoothalingam, 2016). According to Kautilya, an enemy's foe should be treated as an enemy while an enemy's ally should be given the status of a friend. In order to conduct business with the enemy state, the *Raja Mandala* philosophy focuses on maintaining a hostile aggressive defensive position. After analyzing the enemy state's actions from the *Raja Mandala* point of view, the sovereign state should engage in open hostility (Bisht, 2020).

The strategic vision of New Delhi under PM Modi is strongly influenced by Kautilya's theory of the gap between "how the political world functions in reality [and] what it ought to be" (Bhatia, 2016). Modi has incorporated Kautilya's *Raja Mandala* theory into his foreign policy to combat the threat posed by the enemy state, and the same theory has securitized India's neighborhood policy (Bhattarai and Pulami, 2021). Analysts have wondered, though, if the theory is applicable for managing a country's relationship with its neighbors. The *Raja Mandala* illustrates how a state's geographic location affects its leaders' perspectives and, consequently, how they make decisions about matters of foreign policy (Ali, 2019). Today, determining the impact of China on the minor states of South Asia informs India's neighborhood strategy. Bangladesh is quickly becoming a flashpoint in China and India's geostrategic conflict (Ranjan, 2021). It poses a serious danger to India's political dominance and regional economic power, according to Kautilian *Raja Mandala*. So, using the "Neighborhood First" policy, the Modi administration has secured its bilateral ties with Bangladesh in order to stop future Chinese involvement in Bangladesh (Bhattacharjee, 2016).

In order to serve the strategic interests of the Maldives, India has also strengthened her ties with the island nation as China's influence spreads there (Moorthy, 2020). India has also grown resentful of Pakistan's growing cooperation with China on various fronts. Given that Kautilya's *Raja Mandala* emphasizes that a state's status is determined by its relative progress or relative decline vis-à-vis other states in the neighborhood, it is likely that the growing intimacy between the adversaries has caused India to secure its neighborhood policy (Bhatia, 2016). China had room to operate in Nepal thanks to India's 2015 economic boycott of its friendly neighbor (Kaura and Rani, 2020). The Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Railway Connectivity connecting Tibet with Kathmandu is a project that both China and Nepal are eager to finish as soon as possible. In South Asia, the BRI's four key projects are located. The China-led BRI has four essential projects in South Asia. These include: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM), the Trans-Himalayan Multi-

Dimensional Rail way Connectivity with Nepal, and China's cooperation with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Maldives under the 21st-century Maritime Silk Route (Bhattarai and Pulami, 2021). The Modi administration is extremely concerned about the implementation of these kinds of strategic infrastructure projects, led by China, in the Indian neighborhood (Kaura and Rani, 2020).

Securitization, through *Raja Mandala* theory, has greatly impacted India's bilateral relations with the neighbors. In light of these intra-regional threats, Modi's decision to switch from the SARRC to the BIMSTEC and ASEAN is also a response (Pattanaik, 2011). The principles of Kautilya were firmly ingrained in this change, as Modi suggested that no matter what foreign policy India would adopt, the art of managing foreign relations resides in determining what is best for India. Despite the fact that Modi's "neighborhood first" strategy includes financial guarantees, it calls for a suitable system to address the political and security concerns in the South Asian region. No state, however, may develop into a conventional power at the system level without continual domination in the nearby area, according to Raja Mandala's Kautilyan thesis.

Conclusion

The eastern or non-western political thought always had an important place in the other part of the world. There has been a call for the need to bring back the non-western thoughts to understand some phenomena, like strategies and policies of China and India. Among which, Kautilya, the ancient Indian philosopher, has been highly emphasized because of the amount of influence it had in the history. The Kautilyan thought has been brought back by the analysts and scholars to explain about the strategies of India, especially in the Prime Minister ship of Narendra Modi. The study, here, has analyzed India's neighborhood policy. The development of India's 'neighborhood policy' to 'neighborhood first policy', the country is seen always acting in a Machiavellian manner. The essence of the neighborhood first policy has always been realpolitik. Although, the aims and objectives of the policies, as listed, are ought to be supportive and cooperative for collective good. However, the coercive or hard-headed nature of responses and behaviour of India.

The study has critically analyzed and concluded that the India's neighborhood policy has failed in several terms because of its souring relations with its neighbor. The successful increasing influence of China in South Asia, particularly the small states threatened India. In response, India has been coercive and hegemonic in nature towards its neighbors. This can attributed to the Kautilyan ideas adopted by New Delhi. The idea of *Raja Mandala* which says that 'your immediate neighbor is the enemy' has led to the securitization of the foreign policy of India. Thus, this attitude emanating from the Kautilyan ideas have not benefitted India and other South Asian states at all. The shift of India's policies from South Asia to Southeast Asia can also be attributed to the non-western thinking of Kautilya. The securitization of the neighborhood as said by Kautilya in *Raja Mandala* has made this eastern political

thought more ambiguous and ambivalent. Critically, the imposition of this theory to analyze or practically implement must be cautiously done. This idea more leans toward realpolitik which is not needed in South Asia today.

Authors contributions

Authors have contributed equally in preparing and writing the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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