

Issue

Brief

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India in the Indo-Pacific: A Kautilyan Strategy for the Maritime Mandala

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Abstract

This brief seeks to apply ancient Indian strategic thought in the study of the country's contemporary maritime relations. It argues that India should shift its maritime strategy from a largely continental posture to one that focuses on the country's maritime *mandala*. Using concepts from the ancient Indian political treatise, *Arthashastra*, this brief contends that a "return of history" via the Indo-Pacific, and re-emerging multipolarity, require current strategic thought to focus less on contestation, and more on the benefits of cooperation and coordination. The Indian state may then be able to achieve *yogakshema*—or security and well-being for the people—by fostering cooperation and forging partnerships with like-minded nations, contributing towards a constructive regional vision, and enhancing its own domestic capability across naval and civilian maritime sectors.

The September 2021 announcement of AUKUS, the new trilateral defence partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, reaffirmed the importance of the Indo-Pacific region in contemporary great-power politics. There has been a surge in global attention on the region in the last few years in both geo-economic and geo-strategic terms. To begin with, the Indo-Pacific maritime space is central to global commerce, carrying an estimated 65 percent of world trade and contributing 60 percent of global GDP. Geopolitically, the region has been witnessing China's growing belligerence, which in turn has helped tie together the varying perceptions and priorities of the stakeholders in the region and beyond. India—located at the heart of the Indian Ocean region and sharing a 3,488-km land border with China—is presented with both opportunities and challenges that could be pivotal to the geopolitical affairs in the region.

Facing difficult relationships with its two largest neighbours, China and Pakistan, India has had to prioritise, for the past many decades since Independence, its strategic and military posture from a largely continental perspective. Historically, therefore, the country has underutilised the maritime sphere, either for economic growth and development, or for expanding its options vis-a-vis China and Pakistan. India would need to overcome its maritime challenges for it to derive benefits from the changing geopolitical situation, particularly in Asia. It is here where the fourth century BCE Indian exposition on statecraft, *Arthashastra*, written by strategist Kautilya, presents itself as a fitting strategic playbook.^a

The geo-strategic events currently playing out in the Indo-Pacific region bears a resemblance to the political environment in which ancient Indian strategic thought in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* took shape. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's characterisation of the region as representing the "emergence of multi-polarity and the benefits of rebalancing", is starkly similar to how *Arthashastra* describes the political landscape of the ancient *mahajanapada* kingdoms.^b In many ways, the churn in the two oceans—the Indian and Pacific—symbolises a "return of history", to borrow a phrase used by Jaishankar at the first edition of the Indo-Pacific Business Summit in June 2021.¹ However,

a While there is little consensus on the periodisation and authorship of the text, a large number of scholars believe that the compositional history of the text dates back to the Mauryan period (321 BCE-185 BCE), with later redactions and interpolations stretching up to the early centuries CE. Translation of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* by R.P Kangle has been used for this Issue Brief. See R.P. Kangle, *The Kautilya Arthashastra, Part II*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2010

b 'Mahajanapadas', literally "great janapadas" are a set of sixteen kingdoms that dotted the political landscape of ancient India.

India's maritime mandala^c—and the interplay between the concentric oceanic circles—is characteristically different from a continental one, which presupposes an ordered alignment of friends and foes with focus on states outmanoeuvring each other. Instead, the current maritime landscape privileges cooperation rather than contestation, for mutually beneficial gains. The Indo-Pacific, seen through a maritime prism, necessitates a strategic preoccupation characteristically different from a purely continental one.

This brief is an attempt to frame India's strategic interests and approach to the Indo-Pacific in Kautilyan terms.^d It seeks to understand how *yogakshema*—or the people's security and well-being—hinges on developments in the Indo-Pacific, and outlines the dynamics of India's continental and maritime mandalas. It delineates ways for India to maintain security and achieve economic prosperity through strategies that are quintessentially Kautilyan: fostering cooperation, forging partnerships, and enhancing domestic capability.

“India must overcome its maritime challenges to derive benefits from the changing geopolitical situation, particularly in Asia. Kautilya's 4th century BCE Indian exposition on statecraft, Arthashastra, is a fitting strategic playbook.”

c 'Mandala' is a Sanskrit word for concentric circles. In this brief, *mandala* refers to Kautilya's state system which presupposes the existence of twelve categories of states in concentric circles.

d Some previous notable attempts to understand India's international conduct in Kautilyan terms are: Shyam Saran, *How India Sees the World: Kautilya to the 21st Century*, New Delhi: Juggernaut, 2017; M. Juutinen, "Emerging dynamics of conflict and cooperation in a post-hegemonic age: A Kautilyan perspective on BRICS", ORF Occasional Paper No. 208, August 2019, Observer Research Foundation; and Kajari Kamal and Gokul Sahni, "The Relevance of Ancient Indian Strategy in Contemporary Geopolitics," ORF Issue Brief No. 470, July 2021, Observer Research Foundation.

Yogakshema: People's Security and Well-Being

The concepts embodied in the ancient Indian treatise on statecraft—Kautilya's *Arthashastra*—continue to be relevant in the contemporary state's political goal – *yogakshema*. *Yoga* is the acquisition of things and *kshema* is their secure possession; the two together convey the idea of security and well-being or prosperity. Prime Minister Narendra Modi alluded to these objectives when he outlined India's Indo-Pacific vision as 'SAGAR' – Security and Growth for All in the Region.² The assumption is that India's security and prosperity is predicated on the region's security and overall growth, achieved through regional cooperation. Modi said: "When the oceans are open, the seas are secure, countries are connected, the rule of law prevails and the region is stable, nations, small and large, prosper as sovereign countries."³ How exactly does India's Indo-Pacific approach serve *yogakshema*?

A central tenet of the foreign policy approach espoused in the *Arthashastra* is the linkage between the external and the internal realms. An externally secure environment allows the state to concentrate its energies on internal capacity-building. Prime Minister Modi's vision of the Indo-Pacific as "free, open and inclusive", and endeavouring to achieve the "common pursuit of progress and prosperity" of all stakeholders in the region and beyond—will help maintain peace in India's periphery and in turn serve the country's economic and strategic interests.⁴

Stability and security in the Indo-Pacific become doubly important because India's economic growth and prosperity (seen as a means to national security through Kautilya's *saptanga* theory^e) is hinged on the depth of its global engagement with the region. As the hub of global trade and energy supply, and a burgeoning powerhouse of world economy, the Indo-Pacific holds a huge potential to achieve what *Arthashastra* calls the "science of politics": the "acquisition of things not possessed, the preservation of things possessed, and augmentation of things preserved."⁵

e The Kautilyan state constitutes seven limbs (*saptanga*) which together make up the state's comprehensive national power.

Yogakshema: People's Security and Well-Being

The seven organs (literally the *saptanga*) of the Kautilyan state are hierarchically ordered as the following: *swami* (ruler); *amatya* (ministers); *janapada* (territory and people); *durga* (fort); *kosa* (treasury); *danda* (armed might); and *mitra* (ally). The ruler is enjoined to bring about security and well-being by “energetic activity”, and attain popularity by association with what is of “material advantage” and by undertaking “beneficial enterprises”.

For contemporary India, national development is highly dependent on secure Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) both for gainful maritime economic activities and trade and energy security.

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The Indo-Pacific is increasingly becoming the world’s economic hub and, in parallel, maritime commerce is the new currency of power, rather than the conquest of land. How does the notion of *atisamdhana* (outmanouvering)—in *Arthashastra*, referring to ancient India’s continental concerns—adapt to the current maritime realm? How does the rigidity around sovereignty over land—and the concomitant zero-sum attitude of land-based powers in a continental *mandala*—make way for cooperation on maritime commons and trade with a positive-sum attitude towards cumulative economic growth?

Kautilya’s *rajamandala* (concentric circles of kings) had a clearly defined *chakravartikshetra* (territory of the sovereign ruler) which extends from the Himalayas in the North to the seas in the South, and one thousand *yojanas* east to west.^f *Arthashastra* discusses the maritime realm in the context of long-distance trade, especially with respect to luxury goods for the treasury and developing and guarding water-routes and shipping, and duties and taxes on imported goods.⁶ Trade (over both land and water) was the third branch of *vartha* (economics), with farmland and pasture land being the first two. While there was an economic interest in facilitating inter-regional trade and guarding land and sea routes to secure profits in the form of levies, duties and fees, critical goods like war horses were imported through land routes from the north-west.⁸

Moreover, Kautilya’s world, in terms of where the commodities came from, stretched from Nepal and China in the North to Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Sri Lanka in the South, and Bengal and Orissa and Myanmar in the East, to the Mediterranean region, Persia and Afghanistan in the West. Therefore, while there is evidence of trans-regional trade and what is today known as “globalisation” in the ancient world, it would be reasonably fair to conclude that the health of a Kautilyan-era state did not depend on its maritime endeavours. Rather, the king’s wealth was primarily generated from land, with agricultural land being the largest and most important of the economic zones.⁷

f One yojana is approximately three kilometers.

g In this direction lies present-day Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

Maritime Mandala

Today, India's economic growth is critically predicated on the Indo-Pacific region, in terms of growth potential and resource dependence. Approximately 95 percent of the country's trade by volume, and 68 percent by value, is moved through the seas and oceans.⁸ India's cumulative "sea dependence" for oil is estimated at 93 percent.⁹

The maritime mandala still endeavours to achieve security and prosperity—*yogakshema*. Yet, it looks and functions differently: The concentric circles depicting priorities of India's maritime strategy begin with the core – the maritime infrastructure for the homeland and development of India's island assets; the next circle includes the maritime space beyond India's waters and its immediate island neighbours like Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles; and the outermost circle takes India into the Pacific.¹⁰ Importantly, the concentric circles of the maritime *mandala* defy the pattern of "friend and foe" of the continental *mandala*, and they privilege seamless connectivity, collective action, and cooperation to secure peace, enhance trade, and reap the benefits of the oceanic commons.

At the same time, continental geopolitics continues to cast its shadow on the maritime *mandala*. Indeed, connectivity with land neighbours has "direct implications for the stability of India to safeguard waters on a larger scale."¹¹ China, to begin with, is well-integrated into the regional trading system and is a larger trading partner than the US for every country in the Indo-Pacific except Bhutan.¹² It also poses the greatest land border security threats to India. The overlap of the continental with the maritime, therefore, necessitates a nuanced policy approach.

Fostering Cooperation and Forging Partnerships

In Kautilyan terms, the toolkit for achieving security and prosperity in the maritime mandala—which concerns more with global commons and interdependent maritime trade—prioritises cooperation and collaboration. Therefore, India’s immediate maritime neighbours should be seen as associates rather than adversaries as typified in a continental paradigm.

India starts with exceptional benefits of history and geography, and strong relations with the littoral states of the Indian Ocean and also with most of the external powers who are present in the region. As the largest economy in the region, with arguably the strongest navy, India could lead the way and set the agenda through multilateral forums such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). Such agenda can cover various issues, including conventional maritime security, non-traditional security, geographic research, and environmental protection. PM Modi has highlighted India’s role as a “net security provider” for the region at the UN Security Council, referring to India’s anti-piracy patrolling, boosting maritime security capability and enhancing maritime domain awareness with partner countries and even dealing with natural disasters in the region.¹³ While India can derive direct benefits from environmental protection, anti-piracy activities, and naval exercises in the Indian Ocean, the country could also use these opportunities to burnish its credentials as a key contributor to the rules-based international order.

India must ensure that it remains the primary partner for small island states in the Indian Ocean. Several of them share deep historical connections to India, and India has had some recent success in nurturing its security partnerships with these states. These include supporting the Coast Guard in Mauritius,¹⁴ and undertaking maritime surveillance on behalf of the Maldives.¹⁵ India has begun the process of converting its strong bilateral ties with these countries to form issue-based plurilaterals to advance various interests.

In August, India invited Mauritius, Seychelles and Bangladesh to join Sri Lanka and Maldives in the revived ‘Colombo Security Conclave’ to combat the “growing spread of terror and associated contraband network via sea.”¹⁶ The meeting was immediately picked up by a Chinese scholar of South Asia in the *Global Times* as an example of the consolidation of India’s traditional security

Fostering Cooperation and Forging Partnerships

interests in the region, likely to complement and support existing mechanisms like the Quad and IONS.¹⁷

Apart from focusing on traditional island partners like Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles with which India has considerable strategic engagement, New Delhi should continue its recent efforts to build ties with the ‘Vanilla Islands’.^{h,18} The March 2020 exercises between India and France in Reunion can serve as a template for broader cooperation.¹⁹

While Kautilyan statecraft favours internal balancing over external balancing, the use of strategic partnerships (*samavaya*) is also prescribed in situations where expansion of domestic capabilities fails to cope with a threatening external environment. Strategic partnerships serve as political tools that help states navigate an international environment ripe for both cooperation and competition. However, as all states seek to outmanoeuvre (*atisamdhana*) their enemies and allies, strength and reliability are important parameters in deciding partners. The Kautilyan dictum that says pacts and partnerships between a stronger and weaker power inevitably involve the latter ceding control to the former, serves as a caution in choosing allies. It is also a reminder of the ancient roots of contemporary India’s emphasis on strategic autonomy.

“In Kautilyan terms, the toolkit for achieving security and prosperity in the maritime mandala prioritises cooperation and collaboration.”

^h These are the Comoros, Madagascar, Mayotte, and Reunion.

Partnerships in Practice

It is in this context that the Quadⁱ serves as a productive mechanism to enhance security and prosperity while reducing the risks for the partner countries. Contemporary India's plurilateral approach of dealing with powers in the inter-state system can also be said to stem from the Kautilyan principle of partnering with two equal powers rather than a stronger one, or with two weaker powers rather than an equal. The rationale is that the two equals can be outwitted by sowing dissent, and the two weaker states can accomplish two tasks and remain under control. Partnering with stronger powers is ridden with risks.

The revival of the Quad in November 2017 came about as the partner countries were galvanised by “their cumulative power, their shared threat assessments, their shared commitment to rules and norms, and their willingness to defy China.”²⁰ The revival of the forum, on the heels of India's border standoff with China on the Doklam plateau, satisfied two important conditions for alliance-making according to Kautilyan statecraft: a convergence of strategic interests and an increase in power potential. It was in India's interest to bolster its capabilities through “pointed alignments” with like-minded powers especially when posed with security challenges in the neighbourhood.²¹ The plurilateral approach, and strategic convergence counteracted any possible dilution of India's decision-making autonomy, and withheld India's longstanding approach of “alignment without being aligned.”²² Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla, underlining the difference between the Quad—a plurilateral grouping with a “positive proactive agenda”, and AUKUS—a “security alliance between three countries,” subtly indicated India's natural proclivity towards the former.²³

The Quad represents India's primary external platform for cooperating with like-minded states in countering China's push in the Indo-Pacific. It also signifies a qualitative change in India's foreign policy posture, as there was a time in the past when the country saw benefits in remaining non-aligned. To be sure, critics of the Quad say the partnership fails to cover security adequately. This is incorrect, however, as the Quad does engage with maritime security through the Malabar exercise. Yet, the Quad is more than just navies bringing

i The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue of India, the US, Japan, and Australia.

Partnerships in Practice

together their warships; it represents a coming together of large democracies in the region to cooperate on initiatives that include climate action, cybersecurity, supply chain resilience, and Covid-19 vaccines. The Quad is a first step towards a positive agenda for the Indo-Pacific where India aims to be a rules-maker. This approach towards the region is a less provocative, benign, yet effective way to balance the increasing economic influence of China, while also leaving sufficient room for gainful economic engagement with China, and ensuring stability in the region.

Another plurilateral that has gained momentum in recent years and should be built upon is the trilateral between India, Indonesia and Australia—the three largest economies that border the Indian Ocean. The “fast-moving trilateral”²⁴ is seen as a natural progression for three countries that share an interest in an open and inclusive Indo-Pacific. Jagannath Panda outlines this “middle power maritime coalition” as one that operates on common strategic interests regarding China, and that carves out strategic space for these resident middle powers between the larger great-power rivalry between Washington and Beijing.²⁵ Effective cooperation between New Delhi, Jakarta, and Canberra can secure the entire eastern Indian Ocean and play an important role in constraining China’s naval ambitions.

India must therefore continue to pursue a constructive agenda for the Indo-Pacific and foster cooperation through bilateral, plurilateral, and multilateral platforms. It should forge partnerships with a thoughtfully chosen set of allies in the region, and optimise strategic partnerships (*samavaya*) for its own growth and development, while negating the increasing influence of China in the region.

While cooperation in the maritime neighbourhood and strategic partnerships are effective measures to augment domestic capabilities, optimisation of state factors (*prakritis*) is a continuous endeavour of a Kautilyan state. In a globalised, interdependent world where the fortunes of states are interlinked, undertakings of material advantage include areas other than the state's *janapada*. Domestic growth thus relies on successful collaboration with all stakeholders. A state's bargaining power in forming partnerships is directly proportional to its comprehensive national power, the latter being contingent on successful cooperation and effective partnerships.

Therefore, the driving force for India's maritime strategy should not be limited to security; it must also place prosperity at the centre. The oceans are instrumental in linking the country with global supply chains, given the dominant share of sea-based trade in India's economy.²⁶ India has, however, been sluggish in driving prosperity through the maritime sector, most notably by failing to develop adequate commercial shipping, marine merchant navy, and port infrastructure. Despite its generous endowments of a large coastline, growing seaborne trade and skilled seafarers, India is becoming a net importer of shipping services. It continues to have a small share of the international shipping sector.²⁷

Indeed, India's indigenous shipping sector remains underdeveloped, with the share of cargo carried by its ships drastically reducing in recent years.²⁸ The loss of market share and fees to foreign shippers is not just a loss to the nation's income, but also introduces a strategic vulnerability in contingencies, given the tendency of foreign ships to avoid conflict areas. The identification of a nation's merchant navy as a "strategic asset" is not a new development. Even in 1945, Indian diplomat KM Panikkar had identified that "a naval power, however well organised from the point of view of warships and fighting personnel, cannot count for much in the sea unless it is supplemented by a great national mercantile marine."²⁹


India should therefore not restrict its maritime strategy to the military domain, but also include civilian and commercial pillars, including for instance, ports. India's largest port, the Mumbai's Jawaharlal Nehru Port, in 2020 handled only two-thirds of Sri Lanka's Colombo port's container volume.³⁰ The Indian government is keen to change this; the 'Sagarmala' project conceived in 2015 envisions the building of new ports, modernising old ports, and developing

inland waterways to create a robust maritime logistics infrastructure.³¹ Projects worth USD 82 billion under Sagarmala were identified at the Maritime India Summit 2021, indicating the government's desire to ensure India emerges as a "leading Blue Economy of the world."³² India also needs to continue building on the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), launched in 2019 to cover a multitude of spheres including maritime security, Blue Economy, maritime connectivity, disaster management, and capacity building. This needs to be extrapolated, using a whole-of-government approach to overcome the country's historical "sea-blindness" and finally embrace the maritime sphere as a pillar of its comprehensive national power.

At the same time, India's maritime strategy must also have a distinct hard-power perspective. The Indian Ocean continues to offer a viable option for "horizontal escalation" in the event of future clashes with China across the Line of Actual Control (LAC). India's geographical advantage in the Indian Ocean allows it to consider asymmetrical actions against Chinese aggression. In July 2021, retired Admiral Raja Menon highlighted that instead of "throwing expensive manpower" at the China problem, India should primarily utilise its navy; he envisions the apprehension of China-bound tankers and quarantining them off the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in a contingency scenario.³³ While India's military leadership continues to debate the merits of a potential third aircraft carrier versus the purchase of additional submarines, the subtext is that naval assets are expected to be utilised significantly in the coming years.³⁴ However, the navy continues to be the so-called "forgotten service", with continued lowest military budget allocation (15 percent, against 62 percent for the army and 23 percent for the air force),³⁵ leaving it with a "worryingly limited area of manoeuvrability."³⁶ A significant maritime push requires increased budgetary support. Naval assets serve important purposes even in peacetime, and increased spending should be viewed more as an investment than expenditure.³⁷

Kautilya's preference for internal balancing over external balancing means that building capabilities is even more central for India's strategic growth as compared to fostering cooperation and forging partnerships, even though the latter can be suitably resorted to when threats outpace capability. Enhancing domestic capabilities requires a whole-of-country approach rather than the Indian government pursuing the goal in isolation. While the government must take a central role in charting the path forward, it is imperative that the private sector assist in developing the country's Blue Economy and increasing its influence in the Indo-Pacific. The case of Adani Ports developing the West Container Terminal of Colombo Port in Sri Lanka provides an excellent example of how India's private sector can contribute to maritime goals.³⁸

India has long neglected its maritime sphere primarily because it views it as a strategic luxury, an inherent benefit bestowed by geography. Policymakers forget that the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean have been used in the past by forces inimical to India. In his book, *India and the Indian Ocean*, KM Panikkar wrote that despite countless invasions from India's north-west border over centuries, India “never lost her independence till she lost command of the sea in the first decade of the sixteenth century”; it was then that the European colonial powers moved in. Modern India may not fear an invasion from the sea, but it would do well to remember its history and to keep in mind that security of the homeland is not limited to land borders.

The waters around India offer New Delhi with the best means for unshackling itself strategically. There is unlikely to be any change in India's “boxed-in” position on the Asian mainland, with the LAC with China beginning to resemble India's highly militarised Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan. The Indian Ocean, however, provides India with the opportunity to become the dominant strategic and economic player across a vast expanse of the eastern coast of Africa, West Asia, and even South-East Asia. The world's third largest ocean should be the cornerstone of India's Indo-Pacific strategy. While a “free and open” Indo-Pacific refers to a much larger geographical area, India's focus should be on ensuring it drives the narrative in the Indian Ocean in conjunction with like-minded partners. India's drive for peace and prosperity cannot stop at its land borders with its two largest neighbours; it must also extend southwards and include the Indian Ocean. India's *yogakshema* is contingent as much on its conduct in the continental mandala as it is in the maritime one; the opportunity to outmanoeuvre (*atisamdhana*) its enemies is presented by a judicious interplay between the two. 

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