Mandala, Sadgunya, and the Structural Logic of Anarchy: A Reassessment of Kautilya's Geopolitical Framework for 21st Century Great Power Rivalry

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Abstract

Modern International Relations theory is nevertheless influenced by a strong Eurocentric bias that sees Western experiences as universal. This is most obviously seen in Kenneth Waltz's neorealism, which says that where there is no order, states can only choose between balancing and bandwagoning. This theory, however analytically parsimonious, fails to elucidate persistent strategic behaviors in twenty-first-century geopolitics, including hedging, multi-alignment, calibrated restraint, and concurrent cooperation and rivalry. This paper proposes an alternative analytical framework based on Kautilya's Arthashastra, viewing anarchy not as a static structural condition but as a dynamic and predatory environment, exemplified by matsya-nyaya (the law of the fishes), which creates ongoing pressure for strategic vigilance and proactive statecraft. The research utilises comparative theoretical analysis to juxtapose Waltzian neorealism with Kautilya's Mandala (circle of states) and Sadgunya (sixfold policy) frameworks, which spatialise anarchy and broaden rational strategy beyond binary outcomes to encompass neutrality, preparation, alliance, and dual policy (dvaidhibhava). The framework is assessed in relation to current great power competition in the Indo-Pacific and the regional dynamics of the South China Sea. The results indicate that Kautilyan logic has superior explanatory and predictive capabilities regarding selective rule compliance, strategic delay, and institutionally mediated competition inherent in contemporary multipolar systems. By prioritizing analytical performance over cultural origin, the study advances a decolonial shift in International Relations scholarship and contests the presumed universality of prevailing Western theories.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:
Received: 14-01-26
Approved: 28-02-26

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RJPP Oct.25-Mar.26,
Vol. XXIV, No. I,
Article No. 15
Pg. 146-158
Similarity Check - 02%

Online available at:
https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/rjpp-mar-2026-vol-xxiv-no1--270

https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpp.2026.v24i01.015

Western Neorealism's Binary Failure and the Kautilyan Corrective

Modern International Relations theory still uses Western neorealism as its main way to explain how states act when there is no order. Kenneth Waltz's Theory of International Politics (1979) is still very important, especially its idea that states have to look out for themselves because there is no supranational authority. They do this by balancing against stronger powers or, less desirably, joining forces with them. This binary logic has attained canonical status, influencing both scholarly analysis and policy recommendations. However, the enduring presence of strategic behavior that neither aligns with balancing nor bandwagoning reveals a fundamental analytical deficiency within neorealism.

Neorealism's inadequacy is not solely empirical but also structural. Waltz's model simplifies anarchy into a single state that puts the same strategic demands on all states, no matter where they are, how close they are, or how powerful they are. This narrows down the choices for rational state behavior to two basic options: either balance against threats by using internal or external means, or go along with stronger power by bandwagoning. Even later refinements, including John Mearsheimer's offensive realism, intensify rather than transcend this binary by treating power maximization as an inevitable outcome of anarchy. The result is a theoretical framework that recognizes structural constraint but offers remarkably thin guidance for states operating in complex, multipolar environments.

This limitation becomes evident when examining contemporary strategic practice. Countries in the Indo-Pacific are working together militarily with one great power, economically with another, and diplomatically with regional institutions at the same time. India's doctrine of "strategic autonomy," Southeast Asian hedging behavior, and the persistence of intermediate positions between rivalry and alliance are not temporary deviations from realist logic. They are durable strategies. Neorealism struggles to conceptualize these behaviors without reclassifying them as unstable, incoherent, or transitional. The problem, therefore, is not anomalous state behavior but an impoverished theoretical vocabulary.

The failure lies in neorealism's insistence on binary outcomes derived from a historically specific context. Waltz's structural realism was formulated against the background of Cold War bipolarity, where the balance/bandwagon distinction captured much of the strategic reality faced by secondary powers. However, bipolarity is historically exceptional. Multipolarity, with overlapping hierarchies of power and regionally differentiated threat perceptions, is the normal condition of international politics. A theory optimized for bipolar stability performs poorly when applied to multipolar flux.

This is precisely where Kautilya's Arthashastra offers a necessary corrective. Writing in a context of dense regional multipolarity nearly 2,300 years ago, Kautilya theorized anarchy not as an abstract absence of authority but as an active, predatory condition captured in the concept of matsya-nyaya (the law of the fishes). In this perspective, the powerful exploit the vulnerable unless mitigated by constant vigilance, skill enhancement, and tactical maneuvering. Anarchy is not a background condition to which states passively adapt; it is a persistent threat necessitating proactive management.

Kautilya puts this idea into action by using two frameworks that work together: the Mandala (circle of states) and the Sadgunya (sixfold policy). The Mandala spatializes anarchy by arranging states into concentric circles around a central figure, the vijigishu (aspiring hegemon). Immediate neighbors are structural rivals, while neighbors-of-neighbors are natural allies. States that are farther away are neutral or indifferent. This geographic reasoning directly contests neorealism's premise that anarchy exerts consistent pressures regardless of proximity. Location affects how people see threats, how they form alliances, and what their strategic priorities are, just like overall power does.

The Sadgunya framework is more important because it replaces neorealism's binary logic with a structured set of strategic options. Kautilya does not talk about balance or bandwagon. Instead, he talks about six rational policies: Sandhi (peace), Vigraha (war), Asana (neutrality), Yana (preparation), Samsraya (alliance), and Dvaidhibhava (double policy). These are not random choices; they are strategies that take into account the situation and come from a systematic evaluation of relative power. Neutrality, preparation devoid of immediate conflict, and concurrent cooperation and competition are regarded as stable and rational positions rather than theoretical anomalies.

The analytical superiority of this framework has gained recognition in recent academic discourse. Mitra and Liebig (2016) assert that Kautilya ought not to be interpreted as a precursor to Machiavelli, but rather as a seminal realist philosopher whose understanding of power foreshadows contemporary discussions while circumventing their reductionism. Bisht (2020) demonstrates that Kautilya amalgamates domestic state capacity (Saptanga) with foreign policy decision-making, a connection largely overlooked in neorealism, which prioritises internal political quality as analytically subordinate to systemic structure. This integration elucidates why states may logically opt for peace, neutrality, or postponement, even amidst anarchy, contingent upon their internal circumstances and long-term strategic direction. The literature gap, therefore, is not whether Kautilya was a realist or

whether his ideas remain culturally relevant. It is the absence of a systematic theoretical comparison demonstrating why Sadgunya offers a superior operationalization of anarchy than the balance/bandwagon logic derived from Waltzian neorealism. Western realism identifies constraint but underspecifies choice. Kautilya specifies both.

This paper argues that Kautilya's Sadgunya framework provides a more granular, proactive, and empirically accurate model of state behavior under anarchy than Western neorealism. By spatializing threat, multiplying rational strategic options, and integrating domestic capacity with foreign policy selection, Kautilya offers not merely an alternative tradition but a corrective theory for understanding multipolar competition in the twenty-first century.

Kautilyan vs. Waltzian Anarchy

This theoretical comparison between Kenneth Waltz's conception of structural anarchy and Kautilya's framework of Mandala, Sadgunya, and state capacity. Both traditions start with the same basic idea: there is no higher authority. However, their ways of analyzing things are very different. Waltz views anarchy as an unchanging structural state that forces state to behave in ways that are easy to predict. Kautilya treats anarchy as a dynamic, predatory environment that demands continuous strategic choice. The difference is not historical or cultural; it is conceptual.

1. Abstract Anarchy vs. Predatory Anarchy

Waltz defines anarchy negatively, as the absence of centralized authority. This absence generates systemic pressures that push states toward self-help behavior. Anarchy itself does not vary; only the distribution of capabilities within it changes. So, anarchy acts more like a background condition than an active force. States respond by amassing power or forging alliances, yet the structure remains analytically static. Kautilya defines anarchy positively by using matsya-nyaya, or the law of the fishes, which says that stronger people take advantage of weaker ones whenever they can. Anarchy is not neutral; it is predatory. It puts a lot of pressure on states to stay ahead of the game. Weakness invites aggression. Stability is temporary and contingent. Waltzian anarchy explains why states seek security. Kautilyan anarchy explains why states must never stop managing insecurity. The former produces equilibrium logic; the latter produces vigilance logic.

2. Static Structure vs. Dynamic Process

In structural realism, systemic change is rare. The ordering principle of anarchy persists, and major shifts in polarity occur infrequently. Once a distribution of power stabilizes, states respond in predictable ways. This assumption underpins Waltz's claim that theory can explain outcomes across long periods. Kautilya assumes

permanent instability in relative power. State strength rises and falls continuously due to internal governance, economic performance, leadership quality, military readiness, and alliance reliability. No distribution of power remains stable long enough to generate equilibrium. Waltz explains systems after power settles. Kautilya explains politics while power is shifting—which better matches a multipolar reality.

3. Uniform Pressure vs. Spatial Differentiation

Structural realism treats states as functionally similar units responding to identical systemic pressures. Geography plays no independent theoretical role. A distant power can pose as much threat as a neighboring one if its capabilities are sufficient. Kautilya embeds geography directly into the structure through the Mandala. Immediate neighbors are structural rivals. Neighbors-of-neighbors become natural allies. Distance moderates threat perception and shapes alliance logic. Strategic positioning flows from location, not ideology. Waltz predicts alliances based on aggregate power. Kautilya predicts them based on proximity and relational geometry—more accurately explaining regional balancing and extra-regional partnerships.

4. Binary Choice vs. Structured Plurality

Neorealism reduces strategic choice to two rational responses: balance against a stronger power or bandwagon with it. Intermediate behavior is regarded as unstable, transient, or theoretically inconsequential. Kautilya delineates six distinct and rational foreign policy alternatives: peace, war, neutrality, preparation, alliance, and dual policy. Each choice is based on a specific evaluation of relative strength and strategic timing. By default, none is seen as less than. Waltz breaks strategy down into results. Kautilya keeps strategy as a choice. This lets Kautilya think about hedging, delay, strategic ambiguity, and selective cooperation without seeing them as strange.

5. Reaction vs. Proaction

Structural realism emphasizes response. States react to threats created by others' power accumulation. The agency operates within tight structural constraints. Strategy follows threat. Kautilya's strategy is based on being able to predict what will happen. The vijigishu actively looks for ways to gain an edge, changes alliances, indirectly weakens opponents, and puts off conflict until the time is right for success. States don't just react to anarchy; they take advantage of it. Waltz explains why states resist domination. Kautilya explains how states pursue dominance without triggering premature conflict.

6. External Power vs. Integrated Capacity

Neorealism gauges power predominantly via material metrics: military capability, economic magnitude, population, and territorial extent. The quality of internal politics only matters if it has an effect on total output.

Kautilya assesses state strength via a comprehensive analysis of leadership quality, administrative efficacy, economic resources, military preparedness, territorial dominance, public support, and alliance dependability. These elements directly determine foreign policy choice. Rather than listing components, Kautilya uses them operationally:

- Weak internal capacity leads to peace or alliance-seeking
- Transitional capacity leads to preparation or neutrality
- Strong capacity enables war or coercive diplomacy

Waltz treats domestic variation as noise. Kautilya treats it as decisive input.

7. Structure as Constraint vs. Structure as Map

Waltz's Constraint-Oriented Structure limits what states can do. It narrows options. Strategy conforms to structure. The Mandala, on the other hand, shows you where to find opportunities. It shows where pressure can be put on others, where alliances can be made, and where being neutral can be helpful. Structure guides choice instead of limiting it. Waltz's structure disciplines behavior. Kautilya's structure enables strategy.

8. Equilibrium vs. Strategic Timing

Balance-of-power dynamics push systems toward rough equilibrium. Stability emerges when no state can dominate. Kautilya rejects equilibrium as durable. Strategic success depends on acting at the right moment—after weakening rivals, strengthening capacity, and reshaping alliances. Delay is not failure; it is a strategy. Waltz explains stability. Kautilya explains success.

9. Theoretical Economy vs. Strategic Sufficiency

Waltzian elegance lies in parsimony. Few variables explain broad outcomes. Kautilyan strength lies in sufficiency. More variables explain actual decisions. This is not theoretical excess. It is in alignment with reality. Multipolar systems generate layered, overlapping strategies that require a richer conceptual toolkit than binary choice allows.

Waltzian neorealism identifies anarchy but under-theorizes strategy. Kautilya theorizes anarchy and operationalizes response. The difference is decisive in multipolar contexts where states pursue autonomy, delay conflict, hedge against rival powers, and exploit geography and timing.

Kautilya's framework does not reject realism. It completes it. By treating anarchy as dynamic, spatial, and choice-generating rather than static and constraining, the Mandala–Sadgunya system provides a superior analytical apparatus for understanding contemporary international politics.

Mandala Predictions and Institutional Failure in the Indo-Pacific

This section evaluates the explanatory and predictive power of Kautilya's Mandala framework through the Indo-Pacific and the South China Sea. Instead of telling a story, it looks at how different theoretical lenses predict how states will act when there is competition between more than one power. Liberal institutionalism posits that restraint is achieved via norms, institutions, and interdependence. The Mandala framework anticipates strategic assertiveness, measured restraint, and selective adherence to rules, informed by spatial hierarchy and relative power dynamics. The empirical evidence strongly corroborates the latter.

4.1 The Indo-Pacific as a Mandala System

The Indo-Pacific is similar to the structural conditions that Kautilya thought of: a lot of different powers, overlapping spheres of influence, an uneven distribution of power, and weak enforcement mechanisms. There is no one hegemon that has all the power. Institutions are present, yet coercive power remains dispersed. This setting triggers matsya-nyaya instead of institutional stability.

In this system, China is a vijigishu, which means it wants to be the most powerful country in the region rather than the world right away. Countries that are close to China are natural enemies, while countries that are farther away from China's core territory can act as potential counterweights. This spatial logic is like the Mandala's concentric arrangement, which leads to predictable strategic behavior.

Liberal institutionalism, on the other hand, sees the Indo-Pacific as a rules-based order where legal obligations and economic ties should help keep the peace. This assumption does not take into account how much proximity, not norms, affects how people see threats.

4.2 Liberal Institutionalism's Predictive Failure

Liberal institutionalist theory made three implicit predictions regarding the South China Sea:

- Economic interdependence would deter coercive revisionism
- Legal adjudication would constrain state behavior
- Multilateral forums would socialize states into compliance
- All three predictions failed.

China's economic integration with regional states deepened alongside its strategic assertiveness. The 2016 UNCLOS arbitration ruling produced legal clarity but no behavioral change. ASEAN's institutional mechanisms generated dialogue without enforcement. Liberal institutionalism could describe these institutions but could not explain their irrelevance under pressure.

This failure is not accidental. Liberal institutionalism assumes that institutions shape interests. Kautilya assumes that interests instrumentalize institutions. The difference is decisive.

4.3 Mandala Prediction I: Proximity Determines Coercion

The Mandala predicts that immediate neighbors of the vijigishu will face the highest coercive pressure. This prediction holds consistently in the South China Sea.

China applies sustained pressure against geographically proximate claimants while calibrating restraint toward distant stakeholders. Vietnam and the Philippines face direct maritime coercion. Japan confronts persistent pressure in the East China Sea. In contrast, actors from outside the region face rhetorical opposition instead of ongoing conflict.

Liberal institutionalism has trouble explaining why legal and diplomatic rules don't always work. The Mandala explains this through spatial hierarchy: proximity intensifies rivalry regardless of institutional context.

4.4 Mandala Prediction II: Selective Rule Compliance

Kautilya does not predict norm rejection. He predicts instrumental compliance. States observe rules when compliance strengthens their position and violate them when enforcement is weak.

This is exactly how China acts. Beijing is involved in international organisations, but it ignores decisions that limit its territorial ambitions. This is not inconsistency; it is dvaidhibhava—simultaneous cooperation and contestation.

Liberal institutionalism treats such behavior as norm erosion or bad faith. The Mandala treats it as a rational strategy under anarchy.

4.5 Mandala Prediction III: Hedging as Stable Strategy

The Mandala predicts that weaker states located between rival power centers will adopt asana (neutrality) or sandhi (limited accommodation) rather than overt balancing.

Southeast Asian countries do not all stand together against China, even though they all know that it is acting in a threatening way. Instead, they work with other countries to improve security while still doing business with Beijing. This behavior is not what we would expect from a balance of power, but it is exactly what Sadgunya logic says it should be.

Liberal institutionalism cannot explain why institutions fail to aggregate resistance. Waltzian realism misclassifies hedging as indecision. Kautilya correctly identifies it as rational delay under unfavorable power asymmetry.

4.6 India as a Mandala Actor

India's Indo-Pacific strategy offers a clear illustration of Sadgunya in practice. India does not fully balance against China or join the bandwagon. Instead, it goes after:

- Strategic partnerships that don't involve formal alliances (samsraya)
- Military readiness without immediate escalation (yana)
- Diplomatic engagement coupled with deterrence (dvaidhibhava)

This strategy doesn't fit with binary realist models, but it fits perfectly with Kautilya's framework. India sees time as a strategic resource that helps it build its own strength and shape its relationships with other countries. Liberal institutionalism sees this as unclear. The Mandala calls it "rational sequencing."

4.7 Why Institutions Do Not Restrain the Vijigishu

Kautilya anticipates institutional weakness under anarchy. He assumes that moral or legal restraint operates only when backed by power. Institutions without enforcement capacity become instruments of delay rather than constraint.

ASEAN-centered mechanisms perform exactly this role. They manage escalation without resolving core disputes. Liberal institutionalism mistakes process for outcome. The Mandala distinguishes between them.

This explains why China tolerates institutional engagement while expanding de facto control. Institutions buy time. Time favors the vijigishu.

4.8 Predictive Superiority of the Mandala Framework

- The Mandala framework correctly predicts:
- Why coercion concentrates on immediate neighbors
- Why legal victories fail without power backing
- Why hedging persists despite rising threat perception
- Why institutions manage conflict without resolving it
- Why strategic patience outperforms immediate balancing

Liberal institutionalism explains none of these outcomes' ex ante. It rationalizes them post hoc as norm erosion or incomplete institutionalization. Kautilya predicts them as normal features of multipolar anarchy.

4.9 Showing, Not Telling: A Theory Test

The predictive test is straightforward:

- If liberal institutionalism were correct, increased institutional density would reduce coercion.
- If the Mandala were correct, increased relative power would override institutional constraint.

The Indo-Pacific confirms the second proposition.

China's behavior changes with capability, not with institutional membership. Regional states adjust strategy based on proximity and power asymmetry, not legal clarity. These outcomes follow Mandala logic with striking consistency.

The South China Sea does not represent institutional failure; it represents institutional irrelevance under conditions of matsya-nyaya. Kautilya does not deny the existence of norms or institutions. He explains their limits.

By foregrounding spatial hierarchy, strategic timing, and calibrated choice, the Mandala framework outperforms liberal institutionalism in both explanation and prediction. It does not merely describe what is happening in the Indo-Pacific. It explains why alternative outcomes were never likely.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This paper set out to test a simple but consequential proposition: whether Kautilya's Arthashastra offers not merely a historical curiosity or a non-Western analogue to realism, but a superior theoretical framework for understanding state behavior under conditions of multipolar anarchy. The analysis demonstrates that it does. By directly comparing Waltzian neorealism with the Mandala–Sadgunya system, and by subjecting both frameworks to empirical stress in the Indo-Pacific, the paper shows that Kautilya explains strategic behavior that Western theories routinely misclassify, rationalize after the fact, or ignore altogether.

The findings are clear. Waltzian realism identifies anarchy but underspecifies strategy. Its binary logic of balance or bandwagon captures only extreme outcomes and struggles with intermediate, time-sensitive, and spatially conditioned behavior. Liberal institutionalism fares worse. It predicts restraint where power asymmetry invites coercion and attributes failure to insufficient institutionalization rather than flawed theoretical assumptions. Both traditions view nonconformity as a deviation. Kautilya regards it as design.

The Mandala framework redefines anarchy as predatory, spatial, and dynamic. It directly incorporates geography into threat perception, views relative power as constantly changing, and broadens the options for rational state behavior through the Sadgunya. Neutrality, preparation, hedging, and double policy are not signs of weakness or confusion; they are intentional strategies that work best in a multipolar competition. In the Indo-Pacific, empirical patterns like selective rule compliance, calibrated coercion, institutional instrumentalization, and strategic patience follow Mandala logic with amazing accuracy. These results were not unusual. They were easy to guess.

This predictive success has theoretical implications that transcend individual cases. It contests the notion that International Relations theory advances solely through refinement within a Western intellectual tradition. Kautilya does not enhance neorealism; he reveals its conceptual constraints. The enduring nature of non-Western strategic behavior that defies binary classification is not indicative of states' failure to adhere to theoretical frameworks. It is a failure of theory to capture reality.

What this implies is a necessary decolonial turn in International Relations. Here, decolonization does not entail substituting Western theory with cultural particularism or regarding ancient texts as normative alternatives. It means subjecting dominant theories to the same empirical and analytical scrutiny long imposed on non-Western traditions. It means recognizing that concepts developed in historically specific contexts—European state formation, Cold War bipolarity—cannot claim universal validity by default. Kautilya's framework emerges not as "indigenous wisdom" but as generalizable theory forged under conditions of sustained multipolarity.

For scholars, the implication is straightforward and uncomfortable. Comparative theory must move beyond inclusion toward evaluation. Non-Western frameworks should not be introduced as illustrative cases or ethical correctives. They should be tested as competing explanations. Where they outperform established models, the discipline must adjust its core assumptions rather than relegate success to contextual exception.

The consequences are just as clear for policy analysts and practitioners. Strategies based on institutional restraint, norm diffusion, or quick balancing don't take into account the logic of strategic patience and spatial rivalry. Mandala logic-based policymaking stresses timing, building up internal capacity, selective engagement, and careful restraint. It acknowledges that institutions handle conflict but seldom resolve it without power. This perspective does not reject diplomacy or law; it situates them within a broader competitive environment shaped by proximity and relative strength.

The final claim of this paper is therefore not civilizational but disciplinary. International Relations theory cannot remain analytically credible while treating Western frameworks as universal and non-Western ones as derivative. Kautilya's Arthashastra demonstrates that alternative traditions have long theorized anarchy, power, and strategy with a precision that modern theory often lacks.

The call to action is clear. International Relations must stop asking whether non-Western thinkers anticipated Western theory and start asking whether Western theory can survive comparison.

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