MIJRD Multidisciplinary International Journal of Research and Development

Multidisciplinary International Journal of Research and Development

Volume: 05 / Issue: 02 / 2025 - Open Access - Website: www.mijrd.com - ISSN: 2583-0406

Realism Through Matsyanyaya: India's Strategic Autonomy in a Multi-Polar Order

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Abstract— This study examines the relevance of Matsya Nyaya, as described in Kautilya's Arthashastra, a condition of lawlessness where the stronger prey upon the weaker. Matsyanyaya explains the origin of state authority. It is an ancient principle of Indian civilizational thought that embodies a realist perspective on power relations in the contemporary multipolar world order. Rooted in the idea that the strong dominate the weak in the absence of order, Matsya Nyaya mirrors the anarchic nature of international politics described by realist theory. The paper argues that this framework offers a unique lens for understanding global power dynamics while also situating India's foreign policy within a tradition that predates Western international relations theory. By examining India's pursuit of strategic autonomy, the study highlights how India engages major powers without compromising its independent decision-making. It further explores how India navigates competing alignments and balances partnerships while preserving its sovereign space in global politics. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that Matsya Nyaya not only enriches the conceptual toolkit of international relations but also provides insight into India's pragmatic approach to safeguarding its interests in an increasingly fragmented and power-driven international system.

The study aims to offer a critical assessment of India's evolving choices in the global arena by drawing on secondary data, including formal publications comprising reports, statements, press releases issued by the Ministry of External Affairs, foreign trade policies, and many more. In viewing India's foreign policy through realism and Matsya Nyaya, this study highlights how classical Indian ideas continue to shape present-day discussions and future strategies on authority, power struggles, and the quest for autonomy in the international system.

Keywords— Indian Foreign Policy, Matsyanyaya, Realism, Multipolar Order.

INTRODUCTION

The term Matsyanyaya was used as a political term in ancient India (Vajpeyi, 1973). Kautilya's concept of Matsyanyaya (law of the fishes) reflects the principle that in situations of power imbalance, the stronger tends to dominate the weaker, making it essential for the state or system to protect the rights of the weaker party (Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore, 2022).

Kautilya used the concept of Matsyanyaya to describe a state of lawlessness, with no concept of family or private property, no concept of dharma or social justice. In the Arthashastra, it is mentioned that "the stronger swallow the weak in the absence of the wielder of the Rod (Dharma)" (Vajpeyi, 1973). Kautilya thus aimed to ensure the maintenance of order and justice through the sovereign's (Manu's) authority, preventing society from descending into chaos where might prevails over right.

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Matsyanyaya also resembles Hobbes' state of nature, where force and fraud are the cardinal virtues and every man has a right to get what he can, just as long as he can keep it (Merriam, 1906). Only survival and self-interest constitute an individual's actions, and man is in a state of war against every other man. In both frameworks, survival and self-interest drive behaviour, and political authority becomes necessary to escape the chaos of unrestrained competition. Kautilya and Hobbes emphasise that morality and law only exist within organised authority.

Although realism as a term is relatively modern, its ideas appeared much earlier in both Eastern and Western thought. In the West, thinkers like Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes are often credited as the founders of realism. For instance, Thucydides (c. 460–400 BCE) in his History of the Peloponnesian War highlights self-interest over morality, a key realist notion (Karpowicz & Julian, 2023). Yet, such ideas had already been articulated in ancient Indian political thought through Kautilya's Arthashastra, though they never received the same global recognition as their Western counterparts.

Realism has several forms, but all of them revolve around the ideas of power and security. The theory mainly focuses on the three S's: statism, survival, and self-help. Statism refers to the belief that the state is the legitimate authority representing the collective will of its people. Realists describe the international system as anarchical, meaning it lacks a central governing authority. In such a system, self-help becomes the guiding principle; each state must rely on itself to ensure its own safety and survival. Furthermore, realists agree that the primary goal of every state is survival, which is considered its most vital national interest (Baylis et al., 2020).

Human nature is a starting point for classical political realism (Karpowicz & Julian, 2010). It describes individuals' enduring inner conflict, suggesting that humans have an unavoidable inclination toward wrongdoing, especially in political affairs. In this view, power is the ultimate driving force, and a state's chief objective is survival within the global competition for power. Classical Realist theorists such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Morgenthau emphasised that international politics is driven by an unending struggle for power rooted in human nature. In The Prince, Machiavelli stressed that principles must yield to practical policies and that a leader's greatest ability lies in adapting to shifting political dynamics. Similarly, Morgenthau asserted that politics operates according to laws rooted in human nature, and that the pursuit of power is always a state's immediate concern, with interests best understood through the lens of power (Baylis et al., 2020; Kumari, 2023).

Kenneth Waltz, in Theory of International Politics (1979), developed structural realism, focusing on the structure of the international system rather than human nature. He defined political structures through their ordering principle, functional differentiation, and distribution of capabilities. Waltz explained that while domestic systems are hierarchical, the international system is anarchic, and differences among such systems arise only from how power is distributed among states (Devetak & True, 2022). Structural realism has two main variants. Kenneth Waltz's defensive realism argues that states seek to maximise security, not power. Their primary aim is survival and stability, not domination. While anarchy breeds insecurity, excessive power-seeking provokes counter-alliances, leading to instability. In contrast, John Mearsheimer's offensive realism contends that states are power maximisers. Although he agrees that self-help defines anarchy, he argues that states can never trust others'

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intentions, pushing them to pursue greater power constantly. For Mearsheimer, the surest path to survival is becoming the most powerful state in the international system (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Classical realists attribute international conflicts to flawed human nature and inherent selfishness, seeing wars as outcomes of petty human behaviour. In contrast, structural realists argue that conflicts arise from the international system's anarchic structure, where the lack of a central authority creates uncertainty. This compels states to take precautionary measures, often escalating tensions and disputes.

Kautilya's Arthashastra, written around 321 BCE, is the earliest and most comprehensive text on governance, discussing the idea of anarchy through the concept of Matsyanyaya (Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2019). The discipline of IR has historically developed within Western academic traditions that centre on European experiences and theorists. As a result, non-Western contributions, including Kautilya's Arthashastra and Matsyanyaya, remain marginalised or treated as peripheral, despite predating many Western realist texts. This creates a "theoretical gap" where Indian political thought is underrepresented and less integrated into mainstream theory.

Kautilya's Arthashastra predates the realist ideas of Hobbes, Machiavelli, Morgenthau, and Waltz, establishing him as the earliest true political realist. Scholars argue that instead of calling him the "Indian Machiavelli," Machiavelli should be seen as the "European Kautilya." His work stands out for its pragmatic approach, judging actions solely by their outcomes for the state, unlike Thucydides, who remained bound by moral concerns. Thus, Kautilya's Arthashastra represents the world's oldest realist tradition, emphasising power, state interest, and practical governance above all else (Dar, 2021).

Kautilya explained that due to Matsyanyaya, the law of the stronger preying on the weaker, war becomes inevitable, making it the king's duty to ensure the security of his people. This reflects the anarchic nature of international politics, where states seek to dominate one another and maximise their power. In such a system, each state prioritises its own national interest, security, and defence above all else. To survive in a competitive and anarchic world, Kautilya's Arthashastra guided governance, diplomacy, military strategy, and economic management principles that continue to influence the workings of India's foreign policy today.

The Cold War's 'security dilemma' led to the buildup of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs). The Russia–Ukraine war shows how the lack of nuclear power can weaken security, as Ukraine gave up its arsenal under the 1994 NPT. In this sense, 'Durga' today symbolises strong defence through WMDs. Though India follows a 'No First Use' nuclear policy, tensions with Pakistan and North Korea create an 'Offensive-Defensive Dilemma,' and in 2019, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh suggested India might reconsider this stance. Indira Gandhi's foreign policy was rooted in pragmatism, with India's 1971 military intervention in the Liberation War of East Pakistan serving as a key example of this decisive and strategic shift in India's foreign policy.

One of Kautilya's foreign policy principles, Sam (peace), is reflected in India's diplomatic efforts to maintain friendly relations with its neighbours. Examples include India's 'Friendship Agreement' with neighbouring countries and its ongoing attempts to normalise the border situation with China following the 2020 Galwan Valley

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clash, demonstrating the implementation of the Sam principle to preserve the status quo (Bhattacharya, 2024). According to the Foreign Secretary's address on "Leveraging Strategic Autonomy in a Turbulent World" at the National Defence College's Diamond Jubilee Seminar, India has recently acted as a "net security provider" in its extended neighbourhood. This role goes beyond hard security to include humanitarian assistance during disasters like earthquakes, cyclones, and floods, as well as repatriation efforts during the COVID-19 crisis. It also encompasses regional cooperation in the Indo-Pacific on maritime security, including anti-piracy measures, surveillance, and addressing maritime pollution (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2020).

In today's shifting international landscape, the transition from unipolarity to multipolarity has amplified the relevance of Matsyanyaya. India has emerged as a key actor in this increasingly anarchic global system, leveraging diplomacy and strategic partnerships to enhance its influence. By engaging in forums that represent the developing and emerging economies of the Global South, such as BRICS, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Russia-India-China Forum, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), India has elevated its profile among developing nations. Its foreign policy, rooted in strategic autonomy, reflects a realist understanding of global politics and embodies its vision of becoming a pivotal pole in the evolving multipolar world order (Panda, 2023).

The literature highlights Kautilya's Arthashastra as a foundational work of realist political thought, focusing on state survival, power, and pragmatic governance. Concepts such as Matsyanyaya, balance of power, and Sam (peace) illustrate strategies for security and diplomacy. These ideas continue to find expression in contemporary Indian foreign policy, including humanitarian assistance, border negotiations, and nuclear strategy, showing the lasting influence of Kautilya's principles on modern statecraft.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in two key theoretical perspectives, Realism from International Relations theory and Kautilya's concept of Matsyanyaya from Indian political thought. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens to examine India's foreign policy behaviour and strategic orientation in contemporary geopolitics.

The realist perspective emphasises the pursuit of national interest, power, and security within an anarchic international system. Similarly, Kautilya's Matsyanyaya, which translates to the "law of the fish," underscores the necessity of strong governance and strategic statecraft to maintain order and prevent domination by stronger powers.

By integrating these frameworks, the study aims to analyse how India formulates and executes its policies to preserve strategic autonomy and stability in a multipolar world order.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive research design to examine how the traditionalist realist principle of Matsyanyaya (law of the fishes) and Kautilya's other theories manifest in India's pursuit of strategic autonomy within a Multipolar world order. The interpretive analysis will look at the language, tone, and key ideas

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used in official statements to understand how concepts like Matsyanyaya, Rajmandala theory, and autonomy are described and used. The interpretive approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how political ideas, historical traditions, and strategic behaviour intersect in Indian foreign policy.

This analysis examines key phases and policies, such as Non-Alignment, India-Pakistan Relations, the Bangladesh Liberation War, Liberalisation and economic policy, Nuclear Policy, Neighbourhood First, Act East, BRICS and G20, and Multi-Alignment, to understand the evolution of India's foreign policy through the lens of realism and Kautilya's strategic principles from the Arthashastra.

Rather than testing a hypothesis quantitatively, the study seeks to interpret meanings, patterns and continuities embedded in India's foreign policy discourse and strategic narratives.

Data Sources

a. Primary Sources

Primary data will be drawn from official documents, reports, and statements issued by Indian governmental and multilateral institutions like the UN :

- ***Ministry of External Affairs (MEA):*** Official Press Releases, Policy Briefs, and Ministerial Statements.
- ***Press Information Bureau (PIB):*** Joint Statements, Press Release Statements, Statements by ministers and Speeches of the Prime Minister
- ***Ministry of Defence (MoD), Ministry of Commerce & Ministry of Earth Sciences:*** Policy reports and strategic economic partnership frameworks.

These materials will be examined to trace how India's strategic discourse operationalises the balance between autonomy and interdependence.

b. Secondary Sources

Secondary materials will include:

- ***Indian Think Tanks:*** Publications, commentaries, and research papers from Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), and Gateway House.
- ***International Think Tanks and research Institutes:*** Geopolitical Intelligence Services (GIS), The Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), and the Council on Foreign Relations.
- ***Academic and Policy Analyses:*** Scholarly works on realism, Kautilyan thought, and Indian foreign policy from peer-reviewed journals and monographs.
- ***Media Briefings and Policy Commentaries:*** Reputable sources offering interpretive context to official policy statements.

Non-Alignment

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was a result of the struggles of the people from Asia, Africa, Latin America and other regions of the world towards colonialism. The main motive of the movement was decolonisation, to protect

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sovereignty and independence during the Cold War. It was a collective measure among countries to maintain certain principles, known as the "Ten Principles of Bandung", which focus on sovereignty, non-interference, peaceful coexistence, and equality. These ten principles are the outcome of the 1955 Bandung Asian-African Conference, considered the precursor to the Non-Aligned Movement. It brought together 29 Heads of States from Asia and Africa, seeking to "identify and assess world issues at the time and pursue joint policies in international relations (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2012)." The Bandung Conference showed that cooperation between Western allies and non-aligned nations was possible, marking a shift in the global order beyond Western or Soviet control. It revealed how global politics combined division and interdependence, with nations guided by their own interests and visions. Although Bandung "was not a conference of nonaligned states," since 14 of the participants were America's allies (including Turkey, Pakistan, Thailand, the Philippines, and Japan), it laid the foundation for NAM (Singh, 2025). The emergence of the bipolar world made the creation of NAM necessary. Newly independent countries wanted to "join efforts for the common defence of their interests" and declare themselves as 'non-aligned' from either of the two nascent military blocs."

India, as one of the founding members of this movement, has incorporated the Non-Aligned objectives in its policies since then. NAM was India's "independent policy orientation" and anti-imperialist and anti-racist worldview (Harshe, 1990). The Panchsheel Agreement, which was signed between India and China, focuses on tolerance, non-use of power, non-interference, and mutual learning.

"Mutual respect's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence" (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2004), inspired by the Panchsheel agreement, became the core philosophy of the non-aligned movement. However, China's effort towards maintaining the Panchsheel was insincere. Throughout the 1950s, Chinese intrusions, claims over territory, and construction of roads continued. From 1958 onwards, Chinese territorial claims became more assertive, revealing its hypocrisy (Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defense Studies and Analysis, 2017).

India's non-alignment after independence included both moral and pragmatic policies, avoiding alignment with either power bloc. However, the 1962 Indo-Sino War marked a shift from idealist non-alignment toward strategic realism. Even when India asked for military aid, it refused to form any formal alliances. India's non-alignment became a more flexible, pragmatic policy aimed at preserving peace and strategic autonomy by balancing relations with major powers during the Cold War.

The 1970s-80s marked a shift in NAM's motive from political neutrality to a demand for global economic justice and restructuring of international relations. Although questions arose about NAM's relevance after the Cold War, the persistence of a unipolar world under Western dominance ensured its continued importance. With the changing world, the relevance and approach of NAM are also changing. India is not very active as a member of NAM. However, it follows the Non-Aligned position within its organisations (QUAD, BRICS) (Nayar, 2023).

India's approach to non-alignment is now more focused on an India-centric and pragmatic approach. The emphasis is more on a plurilateral form rather than on focusing on all. It has evolved towards multi-alignment, enabling

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India to safeguard national interests and adapt to changing global dynamics. However, India is still committed to the core principles of the Non-Aligned Movement.

At the 19th NAM Ministerial, Kirti Vardhan Singh reaffirmed India's commitment as a founding member. India emphasised its legacy and promoted non-alignment as a practical tool to advance Global South interests in today's changing world (Times of India, 2025).

The idea of non-alignment is deeply rooted in India's long history. Even in ancient times, Indian thinkers like Kautilya discussed neutrality as a wise political strategy. In his six-fold policy framework, he included Asana, which means staying neutral, a principle reflecting India's NAM approach. Kautilya believed that a wise ruler must act according to the situation, sometimes forming alliances, sometimes staying neutral, or even preparing for war to protect the state's interests. This ancient wisdom resonates with India's modern diplomacy, which blends idealism and realism from Nehru's peaceful Panchsheel principles to a more pragmatic and strategic approach after 1962. In this way, India continues to follow Kautilya's idea that flexibility and self-interest should guide foreign policy to ensure the nation's security and stability.

India and Pakistan

India-Pakistan relations have remained tense since the 1947 Partition, primarily due to the Kashmir issue. The first Indo-Pak war (1947-48), the second Indo-Pak war (1965) and the 1971 war stand as the major wars between them. However, this does not mean India has not tried to solve matters diplomatically. UN Resolution 47 about the Kashmir issue was India's first attempt to raise its concern on an international platform. The resolution laid a framework for a ceasefire, systematic troop withdrawal, and a UN-supervised plebiscite to determine Kashmir's future (Security Council Resolution 47 (1948) [the India-Pakistan Question], 1948). However, this was not enough as tensions soon flared and led to the 1965 Indo-Pak war. Here, conditional peace was achieved through the UN and the Soviet Union mediation through the Tashkent Declaration, where both countries (India and Pakistan) declared "their firm resolve to restore normal and peaceful relations between their countries" (Ministry of External Affairs, 1966). The Tashkent Declaration was a peace pact focused on ceasefire, diplomatic normalisation, and future cooperation. Still, it avoided a final settlement on Kashmir, leaving the root cause of the conflict unresolved. The 1971 war initially was Pakistan's internal crisis, but it spilt over to India as well due to the massive influx of refugees, making it necessary for India to intervene to protect its national interest. This was followed by the Simla Agreement in 1972, which "designated the ceasefire line of 17 December 1971 as being the new 'Line of Control (LoC)' between the two countries" (Indo-Pak Relations, n.d.).

Subsequent decades saw continued cross-border terrorism like the 2001 Parliament attack, the 2008 Mumbai attacks, the Pathankot Airbase attack in 2016, the Uri attack (2016), the Pulwama attack (2019) and the very recent Pahalgam attack (2025), prompting firm military retaliation from India. The cross-border terrorism is one of the critical concerns for India, as terrorism is absolutely intolerable, and India will take firm action against it.

India's conduct towards Pakistan is a combination of force (danda) and peace talks (Sama). According to Kautilya, a ruler must use force (danda) guided by dharma (morality). India always tried to balance its relations with Pakistan through treaties like the Indus Water Treaty, granting Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status to Pakistan

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(which it withdrew following the Pulwama attack) and even the Kartarpur Corridor initiative to preserve cultural and spiritual harmony amid political hostility. Each time, it tried to end the wars with Pakistan through diplomacy and strength backed by moral restraint. This shows India's attempt to resolve issues through persuasion and cooperation. From the 1947 Kashmir conflict to the 1971 war and beyond, India has acted not as a client of global powers but as a self-reliant state, using force (danda) when provoked, peace talks (sama) when stability was possible, and alliances (samsraya) only when they served national interest. Thus, India has maintained its strategic autonomy by using decisive force and military preparedness, strong defence and continual dialogue, showcasing that autonomy does not mean isolation but the capacity to act independently and differently under changing circumstances.

Bangladesh Liberation War

After the 1962 China war, India faced another critical test during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. The conflict in East Pakistan created a huge refugee crisis, with millions of people crossing into India. This situation became a national emergency. At the time, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared that "India had both the right to protect its national security and the moral responsibility to act if the crisis continued" (High Commission of India, Dhaka, 1971). Her appeal was directed not only to the international community but also to the Indian people, calling for unity and understanding. It hinted at India's later decision to intervene in the war to help East Pakistan gain independence.

The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War became a turning point for India. The victory not only showed India's growing military and diplomatic strength but also marked its rise as a major regional power. India's involvement in the war was motivated by both humanitarian concerns to stop the suffering and refugee crisis and strategic interests, such as ensuring regional stability and weakening Pakistan's influence in the area.

In 1972, India and the newly formed Bangladesh signed the Treaty of Peace and Friendship. This agreement focused on promoting peace, security, and cooperation between the two countries. It also strengthened India's image as a responsible regional leader that sought stability and collaboration rather than domination.

Although India's intervention might have seemed to go against the Non-Aligned Movement's idea of non-interference, it was a necessary step to protect human rights and ensure peace. As taught by Kautilya, a ruler's main duty is to protect the state's security and welfare, even if it requires taking strong action. Moral values should support the state's interests, not limit them. Indira Gandhi's decision to intervene in the war followed this thinking.

Faced with a huge refugee crisis and regional instability, she acted to protect both India's security and humanitarian values, which showcase Kautilya's teaching of "Artha (strategic Interest) and Dharma (Moral duty)" (Gautam, 2016). Though it seemed to oppose non-alignment, it matched Kautilya's view that neutrality (Asana) should be maintained only until action becomes necessary for the state's peace and survival.

Liberalisation and Economic Policy

In today's interconnected world, where international trade drives global competitiveness, liberalisation is key to national growth and prosperity. India's economic liberalisation of 1991 marked a historic turning point,

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successfully opening its economy to compete globally. The 1991 reforms introduced major changes in finance, trade, taxation, industry, and foreign exchange to boost productivity and economic resilience.

Over the last two decades, India's foreign policy has increasingly inculcated economic considerations as a key pillar of its external engagement. This can be seen from the integration of the business delegations in diplomatic visits and shifting from aid recipient to donor through the India Development Initiative. According to the former External Affairs Minister Shri Yashwant Sinha's speech in "Commerce Calling", he stated that the focus is on converting economic strength into global influence and projecting India as an emerging power (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2004).

Through economic diplomacy, India aims to integrate strategic diplomacy and trade facilitation to increase its growth. The importance of the economy is not a recent development, but something that has been deeply rooted in Indian history. Kautilya in the Arthashastra talked about Kosha, which means treasury. There, he spoke about the importance of wealth for a nation to maintain its stability. According to him, wealth is the base of a strong and stable state. Without a good economy, a country cannot support its army, government, or diplomacy. Based on his Six-fold policy, he mentioned "Dama", which means using money and trade, like giving rewards, aid, or forming economic partnerships, to achieve political goals and maintain peace (Vittal, 2011). This has inspired economic diplomacy, which is used in the present time. Through active participation in the WTO, G-15, G-77 and the UN, India intends to safeguard its trade interests (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2004). India has been following the "Look East Policy" through which it aims to strengthen its ties with Southeast Asia and East Asia to secure energy sources and resources from those regions. Under the leadership of Shri Narendra Modi, the Indian government has emphasised neighbourhood engagement, focusing on closer economic and political ties with neighbours to ensure regional peace and prosperity (e.g., Bhutan, Nepal, SAARC outreach). Projects like investments in Bhutan's hydropower serve economic needs and political interests, strengthening India's regional influence (Botez, 2014).

Nuclear Policy

India's journey to becoming a nuclear power began in 1948 with the establishment of the Atomic Energy Commission (1948), which was initially meant to be used for scientific purposes. It was guided by Nehru's vision that nuclear science "should not be used to make weapons of mass destruction" (Meghwali & Kumarii, 2025). However, after the 1962 India-China war, China's nuclear tests in 1964 and the US tilt towards Pakistan (1971), the security dilemma pushed India towards becoming a nuclear power and taking a more realist stance. India's first nuclear test, Pokhran I (1974), was a "peaceful nuclear explosion" under Operation Smiling Buddha. The second series of tests, Pokhran II (1998) under Operation Shakti, made India a nuclear power. India's refusal to sign the NPT and CTBT, terming it "discriminatory", reflects its insistence on maintaining strategic autonomy and equal recognition within the global order (Meghwali & Kumarii, 2025).

India's nuclear doctrine has three central tenets: No First Use (NFU) which rests on the principle that "nuclear weapons will only be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack on Indian territory or on Indian forces anywhere", Credible Minimum Deterrent (CMD) where India aims to have "adequate, survivable, and operationally ready

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nuclear forces" to deter adversaries, in line with Kenneth Waltz's logic that "if less is enough, more is not better" (Meghwali & Kumarii, 2025) and lastly, Nuclear Command Authority (NCA) which maintains that "Political Council is chaired by the Prime Minister is the sole body which can authorize the use of nuclear weapons" (PIB Press Releases, 2003).

Despite not being part of the NPT, India is committed towards "a nuclear weapon free world" through "a comprehensive, universal, and non-discriminatory approach to disarmament" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021). It actively participates in UN Forums and conferences on disarmament while maintaining that "every country has the right to decide its security interests" (Meghwali & Kumarii, 2025). This commitment to peace while maintaining deterrence reflects India's realist diplomacy underpinned by moral restraint. Reflecting the doctrine of Matsyanyaya and realism, India recognises that only power ensures survival in a world where the strong devour the weak. By developing nuclear capability while adhering to NFU, India ensures deterrence without aggression. It asserts its sovereignty and avoids dependency on another country for protection. Its rejection of discriminatory treaties like the NPT and CTBT, and its insistence on an independent nuclear command, reinforce the Kautilyan ideal that a ruler must depend on his own strength and act according to circumstances.

Neighbourhood First Policy

India's Neighbourhood First policy draws inspiration from Kautilya's Arthashastra, the Gujral Doctrine and Nehru's Panchsheel Agreement (Kute, 2025). Though conceptualised in 2008, it was only after 2014 that the policy truly became one of the cornerstones of India's foreign policy. The oathtaking ceremony after the 2024 general elections was attended by leaders from Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives and Sri Lanka, indicating "commitment to the principle of 'Neighbourhood First'—a crucial aspect of Modi's foreign policy" (Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy, 2025). India's Neighbourhood First Policy emphasises "building of physical, digital and people-to-people connectivity" and follows a "consultative, non-reciprocal and outcome-oriented basis" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). Through developmental aid, connectivity projects, and capacity building, India seeks to ensure that the prosperity of its neighbours aligns with its own regional and security interests—"for mutual benefit as well as safeguarding India's interest in the region" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024). The policy also serves as a strategic tool to counterbalance China's growing regional footprint through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The policy's "primary toolkit is to create interdependencies and economic leverage with its neighbours through connectivity and economic linkages"(Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy, 2025). According to the 2023 report of the Standing Committee on External Affairs, there has been a significant rise in India's Line of Credit (LOC) to neighbouring countries, from "USD 3.3 billion in 2014 to USD 14.7 billion in 2020." Nearly "50% of India's global soft lending goes to its neighbours" (Mallick, 2023). Notable allocations included "US$7.9 billion to Bangladesh, 1.6 billion to Nepal, 2.7 billion to Sri Lanka, and 1.4 billion to the Maldives" (Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy, 2025). However, India's failure to address long-standing issues like "sharing water with neighbours, Suvidha taxes with Bhutan, illegal fishing in Sri Lankan waters, and the Kalapani dispute with Nepal" remains a key challenge despite significant achievements like resolving land and maritime boundary disputes with Bangladesh (Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy, 2025). Addressing these issues will help India foster a positive image among its neighbours and

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create harmony of interests among the nations. Strengthening BIMSTEC and BBIN frameworks will further help consolidate a stable, economically integrated South Asia and reduce external interference.

India's neighbourhood policy embodies Kautilya's Rajmandala theory, where the ruler is surrounded by alternating allies and adversaries. In Kautilya's theory of state, Mitra (ally) plays a huge role in maintaining the state's stability. In fact, Kautilya warns that "Subjects when impoverished, become greedy; when greedy, they become disaffected; when disaffected, they either go over to the enemy or themselves kill the master", linking domestic order to external security (Kamal, 2024). Applying this to the Indian Subcontinent, the internal instability in small states, like economic or governance crises or even ethnic conflicts, inevitably spills over borders and may cause unrest in India as well. Thus, for the stability of the domestic country, India must support its neighbours using aid, development projects and defence partnerships. This also reflects India's pursuit of strategic autonomy by ensuring that no external powers like China or the US influence the security or development trajectory of South Asian countries.

Act East Policy

In a rapidly changing and unpredictable global order, building and sustaining strategic partnerships has become crucial for India's rise as a regional and global power. Among the several initiatives shaping India's diplomacy, the Act East Policy (AEP) stands out as a cornerstone of engagement with the Indo-Pacific region.

The Act East Policy mainly focuses on strengthening India's ties with countries in the Indo-Pacific region, especially with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which remains at the centre of India's vision for a stable, inclusive, and prosperous Indo-Pacific. India's engagement with Southeast Asia has evolved, from the "Look East Policy" introduced in 1991, which was primarily economic in nature, to the more active and strategic "Act East Policy" launched in 2014.

The Act East Policy aligns with India's and ASEAN's Indo-Pacific visions by emphasising ASEAN centrality, unity, and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). It has also led to a deeper strategic partnership between India and ASEAN, which has been marked by increased diplomatic visits and collaborations. While the Look East Policy mainly focused on economic cooperation, the AEP adds a stronger strategic and security dimension to India's regional engagement.

The "ASEAN-India Plan of Action (2016–2020)" highlights political-security, economic, and socio-cultural cooperation. India has been building closer partnerships with regional and multilateral organisations, promoting Buddhist and Hindu civilizational links, and improving connectivity, particularly with its Northeastern states, which serve as a gateway to Southeast Asia (Press Information Bureau, 2015).

Economically, the policy has brought significant progress. For example, according to India's Department of Commerce, "India is ASEAN's seventh-largest trading partner, while ASEAN is India's fourth-largest partner. India's trade with ASEAN, in the year 2022-23, India exported 44% and imported 87.57%" (Sharma, 2024). India also collaborates closely with countries like Singapore and Malaysia, especially in the technology field, which forms an important pillar of the Act East Policy.

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Cultural and educational ties have also grown stronger. India offers scholarships to ASEAN students and has established the "ASEAN Social Cultural Community" under the ASEAN-India Cultural Centre to promote people-to-people connections. Additionally, Yoga diplomacy has become a major tool of India's soft power, with Southeast Asian nations widely celebrating "International Yoga Day", further strengthening India's cultural influence in the region (Sharma, 2024).

Kautilya's ideas of flexible diplomacy resonate strongly with this policy. Kautilya's "Mandala Theory" described the world as a network of neighbouring states, some friendly, some hostile, and some neutral. He advised rulers to act wisely, forming or changing alliances based on changing power situations (Bhattacharya, 2024). Similarly, the Act East Policy demonstrates India's adaptive and interest-based diplomacy, balancing cooperation, independence, and regional stability.

BRICS and G20

In today's world, where Western dominance still shapes much of global politics and economics, many countries are coming together to create collective alternatives. One of the most prominent among these is BRICS, a grouping of major emerging economies that seeks to reform global governance and provide an alternative to Western-led institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the United Nations Security Council.

For India, BRICS serves as a vital platform to enhance its strategic influence in areas such as global governance reform, alternative finance, energy, technology, and climate cooperation. Within BRICS, India projects itself as a 'Vishwa Mitra' (World's Friend), promoting a leadership style rooted in collaboration and inclusivity rather than domination (Agarwal, 2024).

The effectiveness of this non-Western alliance can be seen in the rise of intra-BRICS trade, which "rose 56% between 2017 and 2022 to $614.8 billion, driven partly by sanctions on Russia, which boosted its oil and gas exports to China and India" (Maiorano and Kaur, 2024).

At the same time, India maintains a careful balance between its partnerships with the West, through forums like the QUAD and I2U2. India recognises that overreliance on BRICS could limit its flexibility, especially given its differing perspectives with countries like China and Russia.

While India emphasises "multipolarity and strategic autonomy," China and Russia tend to focus more on "anti-Western narratives" (Maiorano and Kaur,2024). Similarly, India and Brazil view BRICS primarily as an economic alliance, unlike China and Russia's geopolitical approach.

Despite its growing influence, India faces several challenges within BRICS, such as trade deficits, uneven implementation of policies among members, and the risk of diluted influence as the group expands.

Moreover, China's dominant position within the bloc pushes India to seek alternative partnerships to safeguard its strategic interests. India has adopted a dual strategy to manage this, strengthening its role in the BRICS and the Global South while engaging with West-led platforms. This demonstrates India's flexible and pragmatic diplomacy, showcasing its ambition to reform global institutions while acting as a voice for developing nations.

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However, maintaining this balancing act has become increasingly complex in a fragmented global order where trust among major powers is declining and expectations from India are rising. Regional security concerns involving Pakistan and China, along with global economic and strategic pressures, add further complexity to India's position.

Yet, India's ability to adapt and remain independent continues to define its foreign policy. This was clearly visible during its G20 Presidency, themed "One Earth, One Family, One Future," which reflected India's vision of global unity and shared progress (Agarwal, 2024). Representing nearly two-thirds of the world's population, 75% of global trade, and 85% of global GDP, the G20 under India's leadership became a platform to promote inclusive global governance (Ministry of Earth Science, 2022). The inclusion of the African Union as a permanent member during India's presidency further reinforced its commitment to empowering the Global South, proving India's ability to combine strategic autonomy with global responsibility in an increasingly multipolar world order.

Multi Alignment

As mentioned by Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar, "This is a time for us to engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia, bring Japan into play, draw neighbours in, extend the neighbourhood and expand traditional constituencies of support" (Morales, 2025).

This statement encapsulates India's post-Cold War foreign policy of multi-alignment. By maintaining strategic and defence partnerships and being part of several multilateral organisations in the East and West, India is strengthening its multi-alignment approach, rooted in strategic autonomy. According to Pande, "The principle of strategic autonomy is the cornerstone of India's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era" (Pande, 2025). India uses this autonomy to balance multiple alignments while refusing to be bound by a single bloc or alliance. It engages with its immediate neighbours through the Neighbour First Policy. Beyond its neighbours, India has expanded its influence through the Act East Policy, being part of ASEAN, QUAD and I2U2 in West Asia. It also maintains its ties with the non-Western countries through BRICS and SCO.

India's G20 Presidency in 2023, being the 4th largest economy with $4 trillion, vaccine exports, and humanitarian assistance, all underscore its growing influence on the international platform. Quoting Dr Jaishankar, "We live in a more volatile and uncertain world.

There are two big contradictions of our times, the polarization between the East and the West, and the divide between the North and the South. India has a bridging role in both" (Jaishankar, 2023). Thus, in the coming years, India plans to expand its influence even more and become one of the dominant voices in global platforms, balancing its national interests and international concerns in a multipolar world.

In an anarchical world of competing powers, India maintains multiple partnerships to prevent domination by one actor. Like in Kautilya's Rajmandala (circle of states), India positions itself as Vijigishu, navigating allies and adversaries through a mix of nuclear deterrence, bilateral diplomacy and multilateral diplomacy.

This ensures that in a world marked by Kautilya's Matsyanyaya state of nature, India remains neither a pawn nor a prey in the shifting tides of global power, but a sovereign actor navigating its own path in a Multipolar world.

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CONCLUSION

India's approach towards strategic autonomy reflects a combination of Kautilya's teachings and realist theories, which showcase a continuity between ancient Indian political theory and contemporary statecraft. The characteristics of Matsyanyaya are reflected in today's anarchic world order, where realist principles such as survival, self-help, and the pursuit of power prevail in the absence of a central authority. Recognising these dynamics, India has been balancing its moral values and pragmatic approaches, which is evident from the post-independence Non-alignment Policy to the post-1962 era of strategic realism. India's intervention in Bangladesh, strategic engagement with Pakistan and development of nuclear capabilities highlight India's understanding of sovereignty and security, which guides the state's actions. This resembles Kautilya's Artha and Dharma.

Today, India utilises these principles to form policies like Act East, Neighbourhood First, and Multialignment strategies such as BRICS and G20. By strategically forming alliances and building partnerships, India is trying to avoid overreliance on any single power and maximise its influence. This highlights the modern application of Kautilya's Rajmandala theory, which emphasises strategic management of allies, adversaries and neutral states. India's nuclear doctrine, economic diplomacy, and humanitarian initiatives further illustrate its realist approach: securing national interests, deterring threats, and asserting autonomy without compromising global responsibilities.

Overall, India showcases the fusion of Ancient Indian political thought and modern realism, in an anarchic and competitive global order through flexibility, foresight and prudence. For India, strategic autonomy is not about isolation. Instead, it focuses on active participation, the ability to act decisively, balance multiple alignments and shape regional and global dynamics according to its national interests.

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