

# POLICY BRIEF

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## Rethinking Regionalism in Asia: Influence of India's Pragmatic Ancient Statecraft *Arthashastra*

***Dr. Monika Chansoria***

India's rise and consequent role in global politics has oscillated amid terms like emerging power, regional power, global power, and a would-be great power. Primarily pursuing soft power strategies in its immediate and extended region since the Cold War years and earlier, India was and continues to be known for maintaining a policy of strategic autonomy balancing relations with major powers/power blocs. Contrary to the years of the Cold War and immediate post-Cold War period, when it was labeled being rather disinclined to project itself as a power to reckon with, India appears inching, albeit very gradually, toward staking that claim. In doing so, New Delhi is inclined and determined towards forging 'strategic partnerships' that are pragmatic and remain best-suited to Indian national interests, based on converging partnerships with shared interests and goals.

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With dividends such as growing demographic, economic, political, and military status, New Delhi can be described as taking baby steps towards cementing its place as a rising power in the evolving world order. This world order also witnesses the momentous emergence of Chinese military and political power and nearly concurrent decline of America's policy-oriented and strategic weight to confront China's rise, especially across the Indo-Pacific. It is this remodeled multipolar architecture which has been instrumental in goading India to employ its distinct blend of hard and soft power, with the objective that its stature and role will not end up being merely tangential.

The blend of foreign policy strategies employed by India today appears to be revisiting historical contexts, influences, and motivations of statecraft known to being the conceptual underpinnings of ancient Indian diplomacy. The current course of India's foreign policy mirrors age-old cultural and civilizational values. While the world increasingly acknowledges the primacy of the Indian Ocean, India is pushing for a future that places it at the heart of the Indo-Pacific. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's National General Secretary Ram Madhav, recently argued that India has to

completely reorient its strategic mindset and that the so-called ‘American Way’ will no longer be at work in the region. In my opinion, this reorientation essentially implies a strategic drift from a westward to eastward and land-based to the ocean-centric rationale.

***Ideational Influences***

The theoretical roots of India’s strategic thinking and orientation can be traced back in history to the end of fourth century BCE, when the Indian treatise Arthashastra (translated as the “Science of Polity”) – a voluminous masterwork written in Sanskrit, delineating theories of statecraft, diplomacy, strategy, and prerequisites of politics and power, was penned by Kautilya. Known more popularly as Chanakya, he was India’s most cerebral minister and chief advisor to Chandragupta Maurya, the founding king of the Mauryan Empire, who successfully unified most of Greater India into one state from the beginning of his rule in 321 BCE until his voluntary abdication in 298 BCE.

The Arthashastra professed the concept of a strong central administration, and substantive economic and political reforms, further advocating the realist paradigm that was popularized only much later in international relations theory that evolved in the West. The cardinal virtue in Arthashastra remains realpolitik, which emphasizes the state’s self-interests and security endorsing pragmatism and utility to justify state actions, above all else. Although the Arthashastra is often compared to, and many a time, pitted against, Italian historian and strategist Niccolò Machiavelli’s work, what needs to be highlighted is that the Arthashastra was written well before Machiavelli completed his famous work *The Prince* in 1513.

Initiated in the Arthashastra is the significant political philosophy and theory of a “circle of states” which remains of enduring relevance even today, as India pragmatically crafts and shapes its foreign policy for the 21st

century. According to the “circle of states” or rajamandala theory, adversarial states border the ruler’s state by forming a circle around it. As a reactive strategy in response, another set of states surround this set of hostile states to form an outer concentric circle ring. The second circle of states is described as natural allies of the ruler’s state against the hostile states that lie in between them. In the current context, the ASEAN Member States and Japan fit the role of forming the ‘second circle’ of friendly nation-states for India. The grand strategy for India in the contemporary context divides the world into three concentric circles. The first encompasses the “immediate neighborhood” in southern Asia; the second covers the “extended neighborhood” stretching across Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral, thereby implying the entire stretch of the Indo-Pacific; and the third, includes the entire global stage, with India being a key player at every stage.

***Rethinking Regionalism***

When leaders of the 10 ASEAN Member States came to New Delhi as chief guests on the occasion of India’s Republic Day celebrations on January 26, 2018, the message that New Delhi sought to send out, regionally and globally, was multifold. The Commemorative Summit marking 25 years of the ASEAN-India Dialogue showcased Delhi’s eastward attention with a pro-active policy approach and engagement with ASEAN nations. The achievements of India’s engagement with ASEAN nations include maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, defense, oil and gas, trade and investment, tracking and data reception station and data processing facilities, space cooperation. Additionally, there is an increased line of credit announced by India to promote physical infrastructure a

It is time for India to employ a realistic prism of watching the rapid transition of the regional landscape, both in its neighboring land and surrounding waters. With a 7,500 km coastline, 1,200 islands, and a 2.4 million sq.

km. exclusive economic zone, the security and strategy in India’s maritime realm will remain the key pivot in the overall ‘great game’ that is currently unfolding in the Indo-Pacific. Although India’s reported plan to invest in the building of a military base on an outlying Seychelles island has run in troubled waters politically, as the Seychelles’ opposition in Parliament has refused to allow it to be ratified. That notwithstanding, the decision taken by India to develop this overseas facility is being read as a vital indicator of the current course of Indian thinking in the Indo-Pacific. The base on Assumption Island is expected to be funded by India with \$ 550 million and shared by the two countries’ militaries — lending strategic importance for monitoring shipping in the Mozambique Channel as well as ensuring the safety of vessels in the southern Indian Ocean.

Although it is yet to possess the means and degree of comprehensive national power that

shall back up its emerging power ambitions, India’s significance and presence are hard to be relegated within Asia any longer. In line with what the Arthashastra prescriptively professed when it was the sole driving influence on foreign policy thinking in ancient and classical India, the rising influence and engagement in global institutions shall portray New Delhi’s newfangled image as it transcends between three distinctly discernible phases of promoting and consolidating India’s integration with East Asia:

- a) 1991 Look East policy
- b) 2014 Act East policy
- c) 2018 Act East initiative of integrating India’s North-east region towards the overall ‘East policy’

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\* On the subject of India’s foreign policy and diplomatic strategy, see Dr. Chansoria’s chapter as a contributing author, Monika Chansoria, “From Reluctance to Readiness: India’s Foreign Policy and Diplomatic Strategies in the Twenty-First Century” in Jacqueline Anne Braveboy-Wagner, Ed., *Diplomatic Strategies of Nations in the Global South – The Search for Leadership* (Palgrave Macmillan © 2016 New York).

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