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of Conflict and Cooperation
in a Post-Hegemonic Age:
A Kautilyan Perspective on BRICS**

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ABSTRACT

This paper theorises international relations using the perspective of an Indian classic, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, and employs such interpretation to conceptualise BRICS (or the association of emerging economies, Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.) As a litmus test for the analytical viability of the Kautilyan perspective developed here, the paper examines what might be called "the BRICS paradox": the mismatch between theoretical expectations about the nature of BRICS and the ambiguous empirical evidence about it. From the Kautilyan perspective, and in particular seen through the framework of multiple and overlapping *mandalas*, BRICS can be redefined as a novel type of international agent that reflects the emergence of pluralist global politics. Having sought to test Kautilyan concepts in the contemporary context, the paper confirms the analytical value of the ancient theorisations, their potential for contemporary IR scholarship as well as strategic foreign policy analysis in a pluralistic international order in a post-hegemonic era.

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE CHANGING INTERNATIONAL ORDER AND THE BRICS PARADOX

The question of how global power transitions affect the liberal international order has long been a subject of enquiry for scholars of international relations (IR).¹ The realist perspective tends to emphasise the geopolitical and competitive dimension of the rise of the emerging powers and their formation of new international institutions.² Those who focus on institutional and normative continuities, for their part, are keen to point out that none of the emerging powers or new initiatives has directly sought to oppose or reform the institutional bedrock of global governance.³ Still others have focused on ideational and conceptual transformations. Echoing Huntington's observations about the empowerment of cultural identities, scholars like Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan have argued that there is a growing interest in local perspectives to IR theories and a demand for a global IR built on a dialogue between them and the established Western perspectives.⁴

The grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China in 2006, and later South Africa in 2010, referred to as BRICS, illustrates these transformations. Yet, the conundrum of global power transitions, and new international institutions like BRICS and their implications for the liberal international order, remains an object of empirical and conceptual debate. This paper offers an additional conceptual perspective to these debates. Its objective is a conceptual analysis of an Indian classic, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, to develop a local perspective to BRICS studies, and the study of international relations in general.

There are at least three reasons why a local perspective on BRICS studies is useful. First is the lack of broadly accepted theorisations about BRICS and the persistent debate about its political nature. Second is the uncertainty over the application of Kautilyan

conceptualisations on BRICS: It is unknown whether Kautilya can be useful in BRICS studies, what results a Kautilyan perspective yields and how it relates to other interpretations. The ambiguous notion that BRICS scholarship has not been conceptually saturated, which underpins the above reasoning, provides a third and more general argument for the task in this analysis.

To be sure, BRICS has been subjected to various, sometimes contradictory, conceptualisations. Some scholars have interpreted it as a challenger to Western dominance and the promoter of a new international order.⁵ Others have claimed it to be more of a paper tiger as its members are quarrelsome, to begin with, and tended to support the existing liberal institutions.⁶ Moreover, while BRICS has succeeded in creating two new financial institutions, the New Development Bank (NDB) and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), it has not produced a BRICS Consensus, leaving critics of neo-liberal development policies disappointed.⁷ Against this background, some scholars have sought to describe these different and conflicting interpretations as “the BRICS paradox”,⁸ deriving from certain theoretical premises about international relations that pose expectations and lead to interpretations that do not match with the reality.

One major aspect of the BRICS paradox is regarding BRICS’ position within the contending-dominant power continuum or the classic realist narrative that links international order with cycles of hegemonic rise and fall.⁹ For example, power transition theorists argue that the international order tends to be structured hierarchically with a preponderant power at the top of its hierarchy. During a decline of a former hegemon, power transition is likely to produce a contender, either as a group of states or one single great power.¹⁰ Various scholars have already shown that this does not fit well with BRICS.¹¹

The same holds for the balance of power theory when employed in this context of Ikenberry's hegemonic realism. It proposes that augmentation of power by one actor disrupts the balance in a system and thus is followed by rebalancing measures by other actors in the same system.¹² This would suggest that though BRICS started as a coalition against Western dominance, with the increase of Chinese influence in world affairs, it would meet with rebalancing efforts by either Russia or India, or even both. However, there is not enough empirical evidence to support this theoretical deduction. Indeed, the evidence is contradictory. First, under the Narendra Modi government, India has become the US' partner in the Indo-Pacific and has actively sought closer ties with Japan and Australia. This can be seen as a reaction to China's growing presence in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific. In the summer of 2017, during the so-called Doklam crisis, Sino-Indian tensions came close to a military showdown.¹³ These examples support the notion of rebalancing efforts and conflicting relations among the BRICS countries.

Second, and in spite of these tensions, there is also plenty of Sino-Indian and intra-Asian cooperation, particularly in terms of economic and financial integration. BRICS is only one of the many instances where hugely heterogeneous emerging powers have more or less equal influence and where inter-state conflicts have been set aside for the sake of common objectives and international cooperation. According to some scholars,¹⁴ these observations challenge the general viability of the hegemonic realism and the contending-dominant power dichotomy. However, as they draw on European experiences, it would seem logical that they are partially context-specific.¹⁵ Indeed, some commentators have argued that international pluralism, coexistence of cooperation and rivalries, is deeply embedded in both past and present Asian politics; Asian powers, China and India included, would seem to endorse this as a

positive feature.¹⁶ European experience with rivalries, on the other hand, has been less positive.

BRICS may not have challenged the current international order, but it has given a task to scholars attempting to understand it. On the one hand, BRICS may be seen as a process in making, or that it is merely a paper tiger. Alternatively, it could be that, as part of a new and emerging reality, there are no available analytical tools to assess its true potential. Thus, as Michael Liebig has argued, indigenous traditions provide us with untapped resources to develop analytical tools to study IR.¹⁷ According to the proponents of the so-called global IR, this is not just a research gap in the specialised BRICS scholarship.¹⁸ Instead, broader usage of local perspectives would benefit the development of IR theory in general. This article contributes with a non-Western local perspective to the contemporary BRICS scholarship.

The focus of the article is on developing an interpretation of the Indian classic, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, which is an ancient Sanskrit treatise on statecraft and foreign policy.[#] The litmus test of the analytical viability of the Kautilyan perspective developed here consists of using this perspective to explain the BRICS paradox. This is in response to the interest in and demand for developing local IR perspectives. By developing a Kautilyan perspective and testing its analytical viability, this paper also provides a conceptual framework that can be used to study how and to what extent—if at all—this perspective differs from the established or Western IR theories, and the manner it resonates with them.

The second section of this paper provides the reasoning for why Kautilya is a relevant source in IR. The third section presents some of

Arthashastra can be translated as 'science of politics' (e.g. Boesche 2003) and it was composed between the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE.

Kautilya's key concepts in terms of international relations and seeks to interpret them for the purposes of contemporary foreign policy analysis. The fourth section applies the analytical framework on explaining BRICS, and the fifth section summarises the conclusions reached.

II. KAUTILYA AND THE RELEVANCE OF HIS ARTHASHASTRA

Kautilya, also known as Chanakya, was a Brahman scholar and political adviser who lived during and after the era of Alexander the Great's conquests. Although uncertain, the predominant understanding is that the *Arthashastra*, an extensive treatise in statecraft and foreign policy, was authored by Kautilya. Kautilya, who, together with Thucydides, can be considered one of the first realists, served as chief minister and councillor of the Indian king, Chandragupta Maurya (321–296 BCE). It is thought that Kautilya's advice helped Chandragupta to establish an empire of his own in the Indian peninsula, an empire which at its peak covered most of contemporary South Asia.¹⁹

Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is a piece of ancient Sanskrit literature, with over 200,000 words in the English translation and more extensive than Aristotle's *Politics*. It counts among the finest specimens of ancient literature.²⁰ Unlike *Politics*, *Arthashastra* was lost until 1904 when it was discovered by Dr R. Shamasastri. Welcoming its recovery, scholars like Max Weber compared *Arthashastra* with ancient Hellenic literature on statecraft, while Johann Jakob Meyer, a German Indologist, referred to it as the "library of ancient India".²¹ In spite of having been lost, some elements of the *Arthashastra* survived and were passed on by oral tradition through Hindu epics such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, as well as through social structures, religious beliefs and according to Patrick Olivelle, to some extent, even in legal codes like the laws of Manu.²²

This author's reading of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is used as a tool to conceptualise the present.²³ This objective aligns the present paper with IR theory and foreign policy analysis while setting it apart from works in history of ideas, although these are never fully separate.²⁴ It should be noted, as Bilgin²⁵ and Acharya²⁶ have argued, that it is analytically challenging if not impossible to exclusively define what actually is "Western" about Western IR or what constitutes the inherently non-Western dimensions in non-Western IR. Like technological innovations, ideas too travel across regions, mutated on the way and assimilated into new contexts.²⁷ In addition, focus on at least partly artificial categorisations can strengthen exclusiveness whereas emphasis on what unites and what is common can be seen to increase positive sentiments across various kinds of boundaries. From this perspective, the concept of 'non-Western' may contain false connotations about the separateness of, for example, Indian and Chinese traditions, even if those form important building blocks of what is meant by 'Western'.

Consequently, indigenous traditions should not be studied to serve national pride or civilisational confrontations. Rather, it should be the realisation that the epistemic sources of IR should reflect the pluralism of the current international order that should motivate such studies. In the past, the US got the chance to develop, employ and interpret IR for its own purposes, to legitimise its supremacy. This resulted in contextual biases. Therefore, to unravel the secrets of the present world, what is needed is to not only acknowledge and understand the particularistic and contextual finesse of ideas, but also to seek to replenish the conceptual sources.²⁸

III. KAUTILYAN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND FOREIGN POLICY

Early works by Sarkar and Modelski, and more recent research by, for example, Boesche, Zaman, Gautam, Mitra and Liebig have already

sought to connect Kautilyan concepts with present-day political science terminology.²⁹ Following Gautam, this author has in a previous study³⁰ divided Kautilya's foreign policy framework into seven elements: (1) a specific type of king, the conqueror; (2) four measures to overcome opposition (*upayas*); (3) the seven constituent elements of state; (4) six measures of foreign policy; (5) *mandala* system of international relations; (6) three ways of conquest; and (7) three ways of war. This paper focuses on three: the *mandala*[®], the constituent elements of state, and conquest. These three elements in Kautilya's foreign policy framework can be expanded to broader analytical concepts providing perspectives to: (1) the organising principles of international relations; (2) overarching leadership goals of transnational agents; and (3) the foreign policy obligation of an aspirant global leader.³¹

3.1. The logic of international relations

In Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, 'mandala' refers to circles of kings, and an international system based on strategic relations between them. The central nodes in the *mandala* system, the four circles of kings, are four types of kings: conqueror, conqueror's enemy, middle power and neutral power. Each of the circles consists of the friends and allies of their nodal power, be it the conqueror, conqueror's enemy, middle king or the neutral power. In addition, king does not merely denote ruler but also, depending on the context, the whole state.³²

The four nodes of Kautilya's *mandala* system have particular characteristics. The most powerful state, the so-called neutral king, is defined as one that would have the material capabilities to resist and even subjugate each of the minor kings individually, but is situated

@ The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines *mandala* as 'a graphic and often symbolic pattern usually in the form of a circle divided into four separate sections, in Kautilya, it refers to circles of kings.'

beyond their territories. This great power regards the lesser states with indifference because, for Kautilya, enmity depends primarily on territorial proximity. The middle king is the second strongest state, but it also shares territory with minor powers. Conqueror and its enemy are the lesser states that also share a common border.³³ As *Arthashastra* is written without direct historical references, various scholars agree that the *mandala* system is primarily a conceptualisation of possible strategic relations between them, even though Boesche has shown that it also has a descriptive dimension.³⁴

The concepts of enmity and friendship lie at the heart of the *mandala's* strategic function. Yet, for Kautilya, enemy is a state that “is situated anywhere immediately on the circumference of the conqueror’s territory.”³⁵ Benoy Sarkar, writing during World War I, adopted this idea without deeper scrutiny. Gautam, conversely, has noted that while the natural enemy of any state is bound to be its neighbour, not all neighbours are enemies.³⁶ Still, to get an idea about the organising principle in the *mandala's* strategic function, the factors that cause enmity in the neighbourhood should be considered.

Some of the obvious reasons are competition for the same resources like arable land, woods or metals, dependence on the same source of water, increases in population, and migration and the potential colonisation resulting from it. These become causes of conflict only between peoples who live close to each other. Even today these matters are relevant to a certain extent, yet global markets and the relative ease of travel reduces dependency on the neighbourhood. Consequently, instead of neighbourhood, enmity results from conflicting strategic interests, which in Kautilya’s historic context tended to coincide with territorial proximity. This resonates with Liebig’s extrapolation about Kautilya’s *matsya-nyāya*, or the ‘law of the fishes’, or ‘law of the jungle’, which define conflicting interests as the natural condition of human life.³⁷

As a result, the constitution of the circles of states, and their relations with each other, are a question of conflicting interests between them. This modification makes it possible to expand the applicability of the *mandala*. While territorial borders in IR apply to states, conflicting interests also apply to other governance institutions as much as matters of international and transnational interdependences.

Defined in this sense, *mandala* can account not only for inter-state relations but also for global governance and international organisation. This is an important observation, because one of the major implications of globalisation has been the transformation in the political sovereignty of states through various forms of shared authority and pooled sovereignty.³⁸ This is what Rosenau and Czempel³⁹ referred to with the influential notion of ‘governance without government’. The concept encapsulates the resulting fragmentation of public authority and the emergence of new actors including non-governmental and private actors – in addition to transgovernmental (between for example state departments), intergovernmental, intra-regional, translocal (between for example two cities) and public-private hybrids.⁴⁰

Thus, it seems both possible and plausible to define *mandala* as a conceptualisation of *transnational* relations structured by how different agents relate to: (1) each other in terms of size and influence; and (2) matters of governance. A matter of governance can be a conflicting interest or an issue of interdependence between at least two actors. In the modern age, many governance issues are not fundamentally about conflicting interests, but about management of interdependences.

3.2. Overarching leadership goals

Mitra and Liebig have argued that the *raison d'état* of Kautilya's political leadership is the optimisation of state power to maintain and increase

the welfare of its people. This is because only a powerful state can ensure the welfare of its people.⁴¹ Kautilya divides power into three components: intellectual strength (which provides good counsel); a strong army and prosperous treasury, which provide for physical strength; and valour, which builds the psychological bases of energy and morale. According to Ramachandran's interpretation, Kautilya's conception of power embodies four factors—counsel, military might, economy and motivation—and in this form is similar to the conception by the Chinese military strategist and writer Sun Zi.⁴² Pursuit of power is one of the factors that render Kautilya a realist because one of the basic premises in realism is that states seek to maximise their power and influence.

Yet, Kautilya's realism is conditional. A king is bound to do his best for the welfare of his subjects: 'In the happiness of his subjects lies his happiness; in their welfare his welfare.'⁴³ Welfare is the goal, and realist politics the tool. How then does Chanakya define welfare? He defines it as material well-being, acquisition and abundance of wealth:

Hence the king shall ever be active and discharge his duties; the root of wealth is activity, and of evil its reverse. In the absence of activity acquisitions present and to come will perish; by activity he can achieve both his desired ends and abundance of wealth.⁴⁴

[W]hen the king is well off, by his welfare and prosperity, he pleases the people; of what kind the king's character is, of the same kind will be the character of his people; for their progress or downfall, the people depend upon the king; the king is, as it were, the aggregate of the people.⁴⁵

State power is not only an extension of the elements of power (intellectual, moral and material capacities and possessions) on an abstract idea of state. In fact, Kautilya's seven-fold typology of state, or

the ‘constituent elements’, ‘state factors’ or ‘elements of sovereignty’, are fully comparable with 20th-century realist conceptualisations of state power.⁴⁶ Kautilya operationalises the optimisation of power through the following state factors: (1) king, ruler; (2) government, administrative bodies; (3) people, country and the productive capabilities like agriculture; (4) capital or fortified city; (5) treasury or perhaps the tax base and tax income; (6) army; and (7) allies.⁴⁷ State power refers to optimisation of intellectual, moral and material capacities and possession of all these seven factors.

For the purposes of modern analysis, some modifications of these elements are in order. The king and ministers should be considered in the broader sense of an efficient government and the ability of a central authority to exercise decisive influence on its subjects. Roger Boesche describes Kautilya’s administrative system as ‘despotic’, but this interpretation has been challenged by for example Deepshikha Shahi’s constructivist reading of the *Arthashastra*.⁴⁸

The third element for Kautilya would seem to be a compound of people and natural resources, and how they under an efficient and just administration yield both the sustenance for the country as well as the tax base that supports the government in its undertakings and a strong army. Like the king and governmental officials, so would the people be of good character, loyal and capable in their respective business. Today, the productive capabilities of a country would embody its industrial base, connectivity to international markets, position in regional and global value chains, as well as other elements that form the preconditions of economic productivity and competitiveness, like social and physical infrastructure.⁴⁹ Some elements of the modern social infrastructure, like the educational and judiciary systems, link to Kautilya’s ‘character’ of the people and imply not only the build of occupational capabilities but also the construction of societal virtues, cohesiveness of the society and

individual attachment to community. Finally, for Kautilya, commerce is not a-political even if it serves economic exchange. Commerce is also a key element of ‘intelligence service’ as we have learned from the examples of Facebook and Huawei.⁵⁰

The treasury and tax base are still applicable concepts. The fortified city, constructed to protect the population against enemy troops, would need some modifications to become a useful category for contemporary analysis. Societal resilience might be a useful replacement for the ancient concept of a fortified city. It encompasses elements of both external and internal security. It also covers the soft elements of societal cohesiveness, approval of government and a critical and well-informed world-view which provide a fortification against inimical influence. Indeed, these elements of resilience find expression in Kautilya’s theory of society, which combines social control and administration with the material well-being of people and the general acceptability of the king and social hierarchies. However, he does not list these as part of the elements of sovereignty.⁵¹

In the Kautilyan formulation, there is also a non-material aspect to strength and happiness, one defined by Vedic tradition and the hierarchical social structure of the Aryan caste system. Living well in this context would imply fulfilling one’s duties as a member of a caste as given.⁵² Cultural traditions, belief systems and values can be seen as sources of societal resilience, stability and predictability. They also form an element in the sociological acceptability of governance. For example, Peter Stillman defines legitimacy as “the compatibility of the results of governmental output with the value patterns of the relevant system”.⁵³

Of the last two state factors, army and allies, the latter is highly relevant in the modern context, defined by environmental and economic interdependences. These ties cause a fundamental

transformation in the nature and operational logic of the *mandala* system. For example, the productive forces of any country are dependent on their connections with other countries. Various transnational governance institutions regulate how and between whom these connections are built and supervised. As a result, cooperation permeates most of Kautilya's state factors: the circles of states in a modern *mandala* become intertwined and tie kingly obligations in one political entity with the happiness of people in another. This leaves enmity or zero-sum games with only a side role.

Thus, the *raison d'être* of leadership in the modern era *mandala* can be defined as optimisation of welfare in the often transnationally intertwined state factors. This can be defined as the inter-state *mandala*. Leadership in this context can be about solving common problems.⁵⁴ Moreover, if modern *mandala* has to take into account the transnationally intertwined state factors, so can it also be applied to conflicting interests and governance in cases, where instead of states, international organisations serve as agents. In this sense, these are transnational *mandalas*. These organisations (1) do not have kings but leaders; (2) do not have governments but bureaucracies; (3) do not have a nation, but they have people as their subjects and their objectives are often defined with regard to problems experienced by peoples in many countries and geographic areas; (4) do not have capitals but a relation with social cohesiveness and societal resilience; (5) do not have right to collect taxes but virtually all of them have a budget and incomes; (6) some have an army; and (7) many cooperate with other international organisations, institutions, non-state actors and states.

An additional feature in Kautilya's conceptualisation of state, which strengthens the applicability of *mandala* also on international organisations, is the open character of Kautilya's state: it is not territorially bound, nor nationally or ethnically defined. The idea of

nation-states has been predominant among European whereas states in Asia, Africa and South America encompass multiple nations of whom many speak their own tongue. According to Shyam Saran, this openness is distinctive in Asian political history. It would explain why pluralism would appear so much more acceptable a condition in Asia than in Europe, where the integration process was launched to avoid the horrific experiences of the two world wars.⁵⁵ Admittedly, the European Union's (EU) legitimacy as an integration process has more recently been contested, partially through misguided diagnosis by the Brexiters[§] and populist movements with alleged support from China and Russia, about the ongoing migration crisis and global economic imbalances.

3.3. Conquest as a foreign policy obligation

Benoy Sarkar described Kautilya's *mandala* as a 'cult of expansion'. Sarkar connected expansionism with world conquest; Boesche also hints at this. Liebig and Gautam, in contrast, restrict Kautilya's expansionism to the geographic and civilisational sphere of the Indian subcontinent.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, conquest forms an essential part of Kautilya's theory, where the would-be-conqueror or *vijigisu* is a central actor.

Conqueror is a singular type of king because of its normative character, and its role in the international system. The normative dimension of the conqueror refers to certain qualities that legitimise the *vijigisu*'s role as a conqueror. The conqueror should possess excellent personal qualities, and be industrious in attaining and improving his skills and abilities. He should husband his time efficiently according to a

§ Brexit or the British Exit of the European Union was supported by about 52 percent of the voters in a Brexit Referendum in 2016. Since then, the UK and the EU have been negotiating for the terms of exit with due date on October 2019.

carefully planned schedule, and never let selfish desires and urges dictate his actions.⁵⁷

In addition to these features, the *vijigisu* is distinctive because of conquest. The *Arthashastra* classifies conquests into three groups: (1) righteous; (2) greedy; and (3) demonic. A just conqueror, our *vijigisu*, does not necessarily need to seek usurpation or extension of his state's belongings. Territorial takeover, moreover, would likely involve death, loss of money and impoverishment. It would not necessarily be conducive to the happiness and welfare of his people, least of all those newly subjected to his rule. In the *Arthashastra*, a 'king [...], being possessed of good character and best-fitted elements of sovereignty' and seeking conquest, should be neither demonic nor greedy. If he would act in any other way than righteous, he would create the space and need for another state to seek a new conqueror. This is because it is the duty of a king to aspire for the welfare and happiness of his people, which is impossible under a demonic ruler and difficult with a greedy one.⁵⁸

To be able to conquer, the *vijigisu* should have the necessary material and non-material capabilities both to conquer and to maintain a dominant position after the conquest. To establish himself, he needs to set up his rule in a manner that advances the happiness and welfare of the new subjects, thus binding them to the king for material gains and for non-material reasons. The non-material reasons in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* have to do with the Brahmanical order and virtues which deepen the moral dimension of Kautilya's realism.⁵⁹

As a result, Kautilya's conquest does not generate rights without obligations. Instead, by extending the kingdom, conquest also extends the obligations that come with leadership. In this sense, the ethical and material are inseparably intertwined. Interestingly, this seems to

resonate with certain modern concepts. There is, for instance, a similarity between 'benevolent superpower' and 'liberal international order' on the one side, and the *vijigisu* and 'conquest' on the other. As noted by Liebig, these conceptual interfaces deserve 'long overdue' scholarly attention. However, they are beyond the scope of this particular paper.⁶⁰

If the *mandala* in the contemporary context can be regarded as a certain type of strategic constellation of diverse interests around a governance issue, or, more narrowly, a constellation of state relations with regard to a matter of governance, then to conquer means to solve this issue. A righteous conquest would imply a solution that improves or secures the welfare of the *vijigisu* and the conquered. For example, a mutually beneficial trade agreement, or a port or railway connection, would correspond to righteous conquest, while a trade war would imply a greedy conquest.

3.4. Towards a framework of analysis

The basic unit in the *mandala* is the state, conceived of as a compound of seven elements, none of which, in the contemporary world, is fully independent or sovereign, but which is tied to other states, friends and enemies alike, with at least some environmental, economic and international connections. The objective of each state is the optimisation of the immaterial and material dimensions of each of the seven transnationally interdependent state factors, which would obligate leaders or at least the *vijigisu* to aspire for win-win solutions instead of zero-sum outcomes. This holds in cases where the circle of states is intertwined through interdependent constituent elements. These notions might help to rethink the dynamics of conflict and cooperation in a manner that underpins the historical experiences of Asian civilisations and is well suited for the emerging pluralistic international order.

Moreover, while the basic unit in Kautilyan *mandala* is the state, the modern *mandala* also applies to international organisations and governance agencies in the global context of complex and inter-relational webs of political authority. Along with states, these webs of authority can be situated as parts of a state-centric *mandala*, as elements of ‘interdependent sovereignty’ affecting people and productive forces, treasury and allies. But they can also be interpreted as actors in transnational *mandalas*, where instead of states the focus is on transnational agents or international organisations.

Finally, the ideal leader (*vijigisu*) would be one that employs all measures in hand to ensure successful win-win solutions for common concerns, while ensuring neutrality or zero-sum gains in cases where the *mandala* is divided into clearly separate circles, and where the state factors of each central node of each circle are disconnected. The following is a tentative analytical framework:

1. A key foreign policy objective is righteous conquest. In the context of multiple and overlapping circles consisting of transnationally intertwined state factors, righteous conquest denotes successful leadership in optimisation of welfare in the interconnected political entities through win-win solutions for common problems. The modern *vijigisu* has mastery over the complex web of *mandalas*, knows how to keep them separate (e.g., does not mix political conflicts with economic cooperation), and has the ability to exercise effective leadership.
2. In defining the operational environment for foreign policy manoeuvres, primary focus is on what constitutes a given *mandala*:
 - What are the conflicting interests/common problems?
 - What kinds of agents are involved?

- 4What does the *vijigisu* do to lead or overcome, by what means and how successfully?
- What are the shortcomings of his leadership?
- From the normative perspective, what should the *vijigisu* do and who or what is most suitable to be a *vijigisu*?

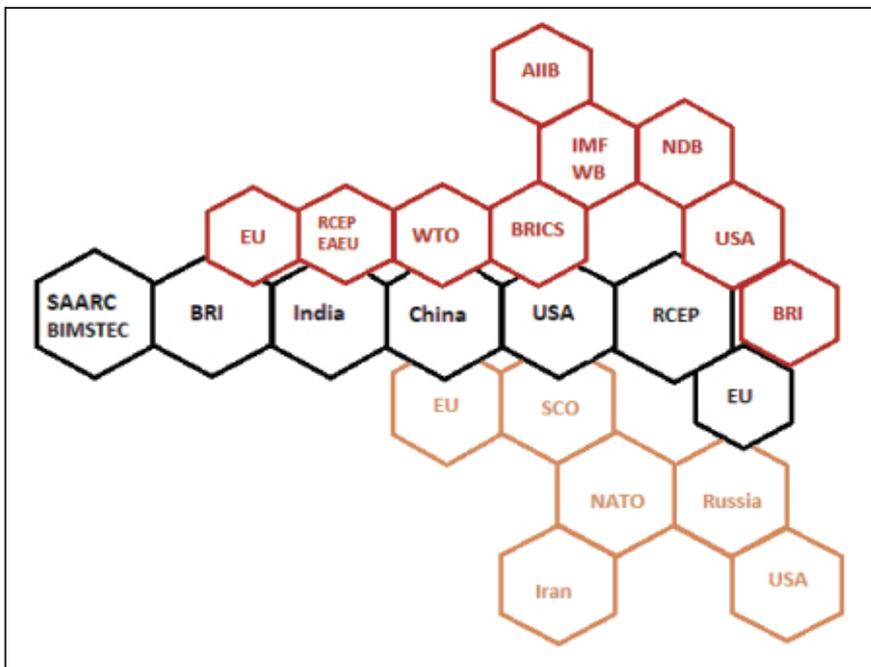
IV. BRICS AND THE MULTIPLE AND OVERLAPPING MANDALAS

Various scholars have attempted to define the association of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa or BRICS as an international agent and to conceptualise its relationship with the changing international order. The BRICS countries portray some elements befitting various theoretical conceptualisations. It seems to be a little of many things, but not fully anything. This is the interpretation behind the BRICS paradox.

The BRICS paradox can be defined as a theoretically grounded chain of arguments that leads to deductions about BRICS that are not coherent with empirical reality, or at least seem controversial or ambiguous. One aspect of the paradox emerges from the idea that because the BRICS countries are so heterogeneous, i.e. they lack the political, geographic, ideational and constructivist elements that, particularly from the perspective of European integration theories, are necessary for efficient cooperation, BRICS is defined as fundamentally a paper tiger with little expectations regarding its global role. Another perspective, this one grounded in power transition theory, expects the BRICS countries to align to challenge either the hierarchical order of states in the increasingly obsolete US-led world order, or the norms and institutions of the current system in order to reform them to better fit their own interests. There is contradictory evidence for both these claims.

In Kautilyan terms, the organising principle in both these claims relates to some aspects of global interdependence, governance issues or conflicting interests. The Kautilyan perspective would thus suggest conceptualising these puzzles through relatively narrow, issue-specific *mandalas*. In other words, this perspective would solve the paradox by changing the premises leading to it. Even as no theory is perfect, most theories can convey some important information. Comparative studies show that BRICS is neither a federation nor a supranational governance entity, but an interstate alliance subject to conflicts or dissonance between its members. The Kautilyan perspective can add to this type of analysis with insights about what elements bind the BRICS countries together, and how they relate to the elements that separate them or create potential for conflicts within BRICS. For this, the Kautilyan perspective provides the tools of multiple and overlapping *mandalas*.

Figure 1: Overlapping Mandalas



Source: Author's own.

The BRICS *mandalas* divide into various transnational and interstate *mandalas*, which are partly separate and partly overlapping. BRICS as an international agent is a compound of how dynamics interrelations between these various mandalas. Figure 1. illustrates some of the complexities of these dynamics. Each colour denotes a specific constellation of strategic and conflicting interests, and each shared border (even between different colours) denotes a potentially conflicting relation. Enemy in one *mandala* can be friend in another.

4.1. Transnational mandalas

According to BRICS summit documents, BRICS was formed as a reaction to the “major and swift changes” in world affairs and the resulting need “for corresponding transformations in global governance”.⁶¹ The summit declarations underline values including mutual respect, cooperation, coordinated action and collective decision-making in “a multipolar, equitable and democratic world order.”⁶² As a result, the organising principles for the BRICS transnational *mandala* are the relation of each international agent towards these values, pluralism and the “corresponding reforms” in global governance.

The United Nations (UN), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) are three of the most important governance institutions of the so-called liberal international order. They are also the objects of BRICS’ critique, causes of conflicting relations, and the targets of conquest. Yet, the source of critique is not in the principles of these institutions. Instead, enmity arises from the discrepancy between values and practices. In spite of the power shift, the US and the developed countries continue to maintain a strong position in these institutions, and the system that should generate non-discriminatory gains for all still produces disproportionate benefits to the already powerful companies, countries and groups of people.⁶³ This, it would appear, is what the BRICS countries want to change.

Indeed, the shortcomings of what in critical political economy literature is called the neo-liberal political economy, clearly felt in the Global South, has been one source of major expectations for alternative development models and thus also for actual financial and trade initiatives for that purpose. For example, Duggan⁶⁴ and Mielniczuk⁶⁵ have separately shown that the BRICS discourse about development and political economy deviates from the established neo-liberal jargon. Neither of them, however, is able to demonstrate that the BRICS actually have an alternative agenda. Other scholars have shown explicitly that they do not.⁶⁶

While state influence over markets among BRICS countries is relatively extensive, they have been major beneficiaries of economic globalisation and stout supporters of capitalism and remain so.⁶⁷ For example, BRICS country lending to other developing countries is as extractive as investments from the advanced economies.⁶⁸ The newly founded NDB has already been criticised for lack of transparency and disrespect for good governance. A recent case is the contentious infrastructure loan to Durban port in South Africa, strongly objected to by the local population.⁶⁹ Another factor is the close institutional relations between the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) and the IMF. BRICS created the CRA as a liquidity buffer against potential balance of payments problems, but when there is need for more than 30 percent of borrowing quota, it must first seek structural adjustment loans from the IMF before it can receive more support from the CRA.⁷⁰

Nonetheless, even if there may not exist a *mandala* that is on a systemic level or that concerns capitalism, there appears to be a narrower developmental *mandala*. The BRICS rhetoric also emphasises the well-established problems of global governance—that poverty and lack of social and physical infrastructure, water and electricity are highly

tangible problems even among the BRICS themselves. Mielniczuk has argued that construction of a new discourse can have long-term effects on how we see the world, how we create shared purposes and how we imagine the future.⁷¹ It begins with ideational delinking from established and predominant discourses. Thus, some scholars have shown that to some extent, the BRICS countries have already caused a rupture in ideas about development. This is also evident from the NDB's General Strategy,⁷² which seems to invite discussions and debates on development:

The bank will constructively engage the international community as an independent voice on development trends and practices. As a new institution, NDB has much to learn from the wealth of experience of multilateral and bilateral development institutions, as well as civil society and academic organizations.

In the context of the developmental *mandala*, there would be need for a righteous conqueror. BRICS has so far failed to shoulder this responsibility even if it has created space in both developmental discourses and institutional structures.⁷³ If the BRICS objective is indeed to advance reforms that are conducive to a more equitable and multipolar world order, their promotion of ideational and discursive pluralism, be it about political economy or cultures, should be in line with that objective. BRICS has promoted pluralism in global institutions as well as at the regional level. During BRICS summits, it has become a practice that the host country also organises a simultaneous conference for some regional organisation. For example, during the Ufa Summit in 2017, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was convened together with BRICS. In this sense, BRICS seems to be working as an enabler and promoter of multiple layers of cooperation.

On the global level, BRICS has faced opposition from the former hegemonic powers. For example, reforms of the IMF quota system had already been agreed upon at the Group of 20 meeting in 2008, a year before the first BRIC summit, but were stopped by the US Congress until 2016.⁷⁴ That failure met with harsh criticism from the BRICS. The BRICS summit declaration from 2015 states that “[w]e remain deeply disappointed with the prolonged failure by the United States to ratify the IMF 2010 reform package, which continues to undermine the credibility, legitimacy and effectiveness of the IMF.”⁷⁵

Similarly, BRICS concerns with the UN has focused on unilateralism. In various summits, they have condemned “unilateral military interventions, economic sanctions and arbitrary use of unilateral coercive measures in violation of international law.”⁷⁶ Conflicts in Libya and Syria and the dispute about Iran’s nuclear weapons are major triggers for these concerns. In these conflicts, BRICS has emphasised sovereignty and non-interference, while responsibility to protect human rights have been more important for the discourse of the US and its allies. The US has been and continues to be the ‘enemy’ also in the WTO and in matters of economic interdependencies. Prior to the Donald Trump presidency, BRICS voiced concerns about developed country regional trade agreements, which contain high regulatory standards that could induce additional costs and serve as barriers to market access for developing countries. The BRICS countries have also voiced their concern over the US refusal to appoint a WTO judge, which could “paralyse the dispute settlement system and undermine the rights and obligations of all Members.”⁷⁷

4.2. Interstate Mandala

Transnational *mandalas* thus would seem to encompass developmental concerns as well as concerns about global governance. In these cases,

BRICS can be seen as an actor in its own right, and indeed, one can argue that there is a need for global leadership or a *vijigisu* that would propose solutions to solve common problems. At the same time, it can be asked, why has BRICS' role so far been modest? This depends on the nature of BRICS as not only part of transnational *mandalas* but also itself part of the interstate *mandalas* of its member states.

States are important even in transnational contexts and thus for example the developmental *mandala* comprises of global and regional institutions, corporations as well as states, who have also other strategic interests. While in the transnational context and with regard to development and pluralist global governance, India and China cooperate through various arenas like BRICS, NDP, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), these initiatives can also be seen as foreign policy measures and employment of the four *upayas* by an aspirant conqueror, China. From India-centric *mandala*, they can be seen as tools of its enemy to legitimise its growing influence, make friends out of potential rivals, and through economic transactions tie India's constituent elements closer to itself.

This does not imply that developmental *mandala* or transnational *mandalas* would not exist or that the BRICS countries (or China and India, in particular) would not have common interests. It does, however, imply that BRICS agendas are forged within inter-state mandalas, where India has to be cautious about China and thus, where the dynamics between these two countries affect the manner in which they cooperate on the transitional level. Two conclusions can be made from these observations.

First, with regard to the developmental *mandala*, it would be desirable that BRICS could emerge as a *vijigisu*, a righteous conqueror

that would lead international cooperation to solve problems of basic social and physical infrastructure, environmental degradation and climate warming. Each of BRICS members can seek to take that role and from a normative perspective, they should see it as their obligation.

Second, each BRICS member also has an obligation to protect the welfare of their peoples and other transnationally entwined elements of their sovereignty, as well as to optimise their influence over these elements. In other words, they have to be inquisitive about the policies of other BRICS members. Considering that China has launched three huge economic initiatives—the RCEP, AIIB and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—BRICS members also need to be cautious to not bandwagon with these initiatives, unless they are convinced that China is a righteous conqueror and they are willing to subject themselves to it.

Consequently, from the Kautilyan perspective it appears that the questions about whether or not BRICS has what it takes to become a global leader in development and global governance, or whether it should or should not aspire for such a role, might be the wrong ones to ask – at least for now. The main reason is that the precondition for BRICS to be able to create a common political agenda for economic development and global governance is the rise of a *vijigisu* among them. In the contemporary context, this would appear far-fetched. At the same time, BRICS countries do have common concerns as when BRICS as an alliance functions as an agent of global dialogue and promoter of pluralism, it would seem to best serve these interests.

This paper proposes to approach BRICS through the assessment of the dynamics of conflict and cooperation in transnational and interstate mandalas. Using these analytical lenses would not seem to pose an analytical dilemma per se, yet it bears witness to the emerging dynamics of pluralistic international relations. To study these dynamics from

descriptive, strategic and normative approaches, a Kautilyan perspective would be useful. Further research in developing these ideas as well as applying them on contemporary politics is needed.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to develop conceptual tools to study international relations through an interpretative analysis of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. It then applied this perspective on conceptualising BRICS using the so-called BRICS paradox as a litmus test for the Kautilyan perspective. This brief analysis of BRICS has demonstrated the applicability of the perspective. It sought to present the overlapping transnational and interstate *mandalas* as an analytical tool to examine the dynamics of conflict and cooperation that define BRICS as an international agent and which explain the so-called BRICS paradox.

The Kautilyan perspective has successfully passed its litmus test; it has relevance for IR studies for four reasons. First, classical texts provide an important source from which to reconceptualise the present, to rethink, refine and even challenge well-established theorisations. Second, Kautilya forms a crucial element in the conceptual history of IR. Third, Kautilya can be employed to study and understand India's contemporary foreign politics. Fourth, Kautilya's *Arthashastra* can be used to complement and develop contemporary IR and strategic analysis.

The main conceptual contribution of this paper relates to the concepts of *mandala* and conquest, or the nature of international relations and the main foreign policy objectives. Two types of circles were presented, transnational and interstate *mandalas*. In transnational *mandalas*, the central agent may be an international organisation or some other agent of global governance. In interstate

mandalas, the central node of analysis is a state, albeit the circles around it involve non-state actors and/or international organisations.

Finally, with regard to future research, the perspective provided here may be used to study differences, commonalities and complementarities between this and the established IR perspectives. As Kautilya was a realist political theorist, it would be particularly promising to enquire into the relationship between the Kautilyan perspective developed here and some of the key notions in other realist theories. For example, what is the relation between ‘transnationally intertwined state factors’ and ‘national interest’ or ‘institutional constraints’, and how do the ideas of ‘conquest’ and the ‘circle of states’ relate to ‘multilateral diplomacy’ or ‘hegemonic transition’? 

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