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## Emerging powers and new global politics? An Indian perspective on the BRICS paradox

Marko Juutinen

Faculty of Management and Business, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

### ABSTRACT

Complementing international relations theories with indigenous perspectives has become ever more relevant with the pace of change in international affairs. BRICS is one of the new initiatives that can be seen as factors driving that change. Yet, it is difficult to theorise BRICS as an international agent, especially in the context of global governance. This article has two objectives: first, to theorise international relations from a non-Western perspective, i.e. through an interpretation of an Indian classic, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*; and second, to employ that interpretation to conceptualise BRICS. As a litmus test for the analytical viability of the Kautilyan perspective, this paper uses it to decipher a puzzle that some scholars have called the BRICS paradox, i.e. the mismatch between theoretical expectations and reality. This paper finds that the Kautilyan perspective as developed here seems to pass the test and explain the BRICS paradox. Having sought to test Kautilyan concepts in the contemporary context, the paper confirms the analytical value of the ancient theorisations and their potential for contemporary IR scholarship.

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## Introduction: changing international order and the BRICS paradox

Since the 1990s, the question of how global power transitions affect the liberal international order has puzzled international relations (IR) scholars.<sup>1</sup> The realist perspective tends to emphasize the geopolitical and competitive dimension of the rise of the emerging powers and the formation of new international institutions by them.<sup>2</sup> Those who focus on institutional and normative continuities, on the other hand, are keen to point out that none of the emerging powers or new initiatives has in a direct manner sought to oppose or reform the institutional bedrock of global governance.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

The grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China in 2006, and later South Africa in 2010, referred to as BRICS, is a case in point for 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 article provides 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.

Three reasons legitimise the use of a local perspective on BRICS studies. First is the lack of broadly accepted theorisations about BRICS and the persisting debate about its political nature. Second is the uncertainty over the application of Kautilyan conceptualisations on BRICS: we do not yet know whether Kautilya can be useful in BRICS studies, what results a Kautilyan perspective yields and how it relates to other interpretations. The perhaps ambiguous notion that BRICS scholarship has not been conceptually saturated, which underpins the above reasoning, provides a third and more general argument for the research task in this study. It is also a central argument for using non-Western perspectives and thus treated with more detail in Section 2, 'Who was Kautilya and why is his *Arthashastra* relevant?'

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.<sup>5</sup> Others have claimed it to be more of a paper tiger and of little relevance because its members were quarrelsome and tended to support the existing liberal institutions.<sup>6</sup> 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 and disillusioned.<sup>7</sup> Against this background, some scholars have sought to describe these different and conflicting interpretations as the BRICS paradox.<sup>8</sup>

According to *The Merriam Webster Dictionary*, a paradox can be 'an argument that apparently derives self-contradictory conclusions by valid deduction from acceptable premises'. The BRICS paradox derives from certain theoretical premises about international relations that pose such expectations and lead to interpretations that do not seem to 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.<sup>9</sup> For example, power transition theorists argue that the international order always 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.<sup>10</sup> Various scholars have already shown that this does not fit well with BRICS.<sup>11</sup>

The same holds for the balance of power theory when employed in this context of 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.<sup>12</sup> 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. Rather, 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 Summer 2017, during the so called Doklam crisis, Sino-Indian tensions came close to a military showdown. 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 just one of the many instances where hugely heterogeneous emerging powers have more or less equal influence and where inter-state conflicts have been put aside for the aspiration of common objectives and international cooperation. According to some scholars,<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> European experience with rivalries, on the other hand, has been less positive. Section 2 will present this theoretical contextuality as one of the reasons to expand the repertoire of IR theory with local perspectives, as has been done in this paper.

BRICS may not have challenged the current international order, but it has posed a challenge for 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 without any of the ferocity of the real beast. Alternatively, it could be that, as part of a new and emerging reality, we are lacking in the proper analytical tools needed 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.<sup>16</sup> According to the proponents of the so-called global IR, this is not just a research gap in the specialized BRICS scholarship.<sup>17</sup> 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 article 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 to what extent it resonates with them. In other words, it seeks to provide a perspective that can be employed in the further development of global IR perspectives.

The article is divided as follows: The second section provides the reasoning for why Kautilya is a relevant source in IR. It also provides some methodological notes about how I read the *Arthashastra*. The third section presents some of 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.

## Who was Kautilya and why is his *Arthashastra* relevant?

Kautilya, also known as Chanakya, was a Brahman scholar and political advisor living during and after the turbulences of Alexander the Great's conquests. Though there is some uncertainty about it, 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.<sup>18</sup>

With over 200,000 words in the English translation and more extensive than Aristotle's *Politics*, Kautilya's *Arthashastra* counts among the finest specimen of ancient literature.<sup>19</sup> However, 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'.<sup>20</sup> In spite of having been lost, various scholars have argued that at least 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 legal codes like the laws of Manu.<sup>21</sup>

For IR studies, Kautilya is relevant in at least four ways. First, classical texts provide an important source from which to reconceptualise the present, to rethink, refine and even challenge well-established theorisations. While historians seek to understand, explain and even reconstruct the past, political theorists attempt to hypothesise the present. In this sense, political theorists are not faithful to the past. They can use classical texts to develop new solutions to old problems or redefine old problems in new contexts. Thus, in my reading of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, I seek the tools to conceptualise the present.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

Second, Kautilya forms a crucial element in the conceptual history of IR. Embedded in the historical context of the Hindu king Chandragupta's empire building, *Arthashastra* opens a window to ancient Indian scholarship and the political thought of one of the world's first great civilisations. Yet, unlike Thucydides, Kautilya did not seek to describe past battles but provide a manual for future conquests. Still, as his theories gained a broad audience and influential followers, they provide tools to understand South Asian history and statecraft.<sup>24</sup> Third, they are also useful for studying India's contemporary foreign politics and have been used in this manner by, for instance, Aparna Pande, Shyam Saran and Alyssa Ayres.<sup>25</sup>

Fourth, and related to the first, Kautilya's *Arthashastra* can be used to complement and develop contemporary IR. There is a particular need for this, depending on the claimed contextual or historic-political bias of Western IR theory.<sup>26</sup> The relevance of European history has been pointed out by for example John Hobson and John Ikenberry.<sup>27</sup> Some others, like Kees van der Pijl,<sup>28</sup> emphasise the role of US foreign policy interests. Non-Western perspectives and the development of the so called Global

IR seek to remedy these issues.<sup>29</sup> They have also been seen as part of the epistemic decolonisation of IR,<sup>30</sup> but they also help to better understand rising powers and their foreign policies<sup>31</sup> as well as the international order in the post-hegemonic era.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, some scholars have employed local historical traditions to imagine and conceptualize global ethics. For example Bruce Rich has studied Kautilya and the legacy of Chandragupta's grandson, Ashoka, for this purpose.<sup>33</sup>

Having used the concept of Western IR, it should perhaps be noted, as Bilgin<sup>34</sup> and Acharya<sup>35</sup> 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 have travelled across regions, mutated on the way and assimilated into new contexts.<sup>36</sup> 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. Hence, to unravel the secrets of the present world, we need not only to acknowledge and understand the particularistic and contextual finesse of ideas, but also to seek to replenish our conceptual sources.<sup>37</sup> This is what the next section devotes itself to.

### **Kautilyan international relations and foreign policy**

This section presents Kautilya's key concepts of international relations and foreign policy analysis and attempts to interpret them. Early works by Sarkar and Modelski, and more recent works by, for example, Boesche, Zaman, Gautam, Mitra and Liebig have already sought to connect Kautilyan concepts with present-day political science terminology.<sup>38</sup> Following Gautam, I have in a previous study divided Kautilya's foreign policy framework into the following seven elements: (1) a specific type of king, the conqueror, (2) measures to overcome opposition, (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. In this article, I will instead focus on only three, the mandala, the constituent elements of state and conquest. I interpret that these three elements in Kautilya's foreign policy framework can be expanded to broader analytical concepts providing perspectives to (1) the organizing principles of international relations, (2) overarching leadership goals of transnational agents and (3) the foreign policy obligation of an aspirant global leader.<sup>39</sup>

## The logic of international relations

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’s *Arthashastra*, it 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, moreover, 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.<sup>40</sup>

The four central 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 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.<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup>

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’.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup> Still, to get an idea about the organising principle in the *mandala*’s strategic function, we should consider what factors cause enmity in the neighbourhood.

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 travelling reduces dependency on the neighbourhood. Consequently, I would argue that 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.<sup>45</sup>

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 apply also on other governance institutions as much as matters of international and transnational interdependences. 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.

### *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.<sup>46</sup> Similar to the Chinese military strategist and writer Sun Zi, 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.<sup>47</sup> Pursuit of power is one of the factors that renders 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.' 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.<sup>48</sup>

[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.<sup>49</sup>

State power is not just 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 twentieth-century realist conceptualisations of state power.<sup>50</sup> Kautilya operationalises the optimisation of power through the following state factors: (1) king, ruler; (2) government, administrative bodies; (3) productive capabilities like agriculture; (4) capital or fortified city; (5) treasury or perhaps the tax base and tax income; (6) army; and (7) allies.<sup>51</sup> 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. This aspect is strong in Kautilya's 'despotic' administrative system, as described by Boesche.<sup>52</sup> Today the third factor, i.e. productive capabilities, would encompass not only natural resources, but also productive forces like an industrial base. It would also embody 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.<sup>53</sup> The treasury and tax base are still applicable.

The fortified city, constructed in order 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.<sup>54</sup>

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 implies fulfilling one's duties as a member of a caste as given.<sup>55</sup> In a society where the caste system has been imprinted on people's minds, stark inequalities in economic and social standing are acceptable because the beliefs underpinning them form a basis of their legitimacy. With regard to societal resilience, stability and predictability, kingly rule in a Brahmanical society thus bears a distinct resemblance to a system based on rule of law.

Out 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, I would argue, 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. Leadership in this context can be about solving common problems.<sup>56</sup>

An additional feature in Kautilya's conceptualisation of state, which strengthens this interpretation, is the open character of Kautilya's state: it is not territorially bound, nor nationally or ethnically defined. According to Shyam Saran, this openness is distinctive in Asian political history. It would explain why pluralism and international anarchy appear so much more acceptable concepts in Asia than in Europe, the battleground of the Westphalian nation-states.<sup>57</sup>

### **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.<sup>58</sup> 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 carefully planned schedule, and never let selfish desires and urges dictate his actions.<sup>59</sup>

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) demonical. 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*, we read that 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.<sup>60</sup>

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.<sup>61</sup>

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 out of the scope of this particular paper.<sup>62</sup>

Now, if we maintain that 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.

### **Towards a framework of analysis**

In this section, I have discussed Kautilya's key concepts of international relations and foreign policy and, through interpretative analysis, sought to adapt them to the present-day context. I have paid particular attention to the organising principle in Kautilya's

*mandala* arguing that strategic relations do not depend on territorial proximity between territorial political entities or nation-states. Instead, *mandala* can be defined as a compound of multiple and overlapping *transnational* relations structured by how different agents relate to (1) each other in terms of size and influence; and (2) how these agents relate to a matter of governance, dispute or common concern.

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.

Finally, the ideal leader 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. Let me synthesise these notions shortly as 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?
  - What 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*?

## BRICS and the multiple and overlapping mandalas

To define BRICS as an international agent and to conceptualise its relationship with the changing international order is considered a challenge by BRICS scholars. The BRICS countries portray some elements befitting various theoretical conceptualisations. It seems to be a bit of many things, but not fully anything. This, at least, is the interpretation behind the BRICS paradox.

The BRICS paradox can be defined as a theoretically grounded chain of arguments that lead to deductions about BRICS that are not coherent with empirical reality, or at least seem controversial or ambiguous. One aspect of the paradox evolves from the idea

that because the BRICS countries are so heterogeneous, i.e. because 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. Of course, no theory is perfect, but most theories can convey some important information. Comparative studies would tell us 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 the elements are that 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*.

What then are the BRICS *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'. The values that the BRICS have underlined in all of their summit declarations include mutual respect, cooperation, coordinated action and collective decision-making in 'a multipolar, equitable and democratic world order'.<sup>63</sup> As a result, the organising principles for the BRICS *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 still maintain a strong position in these institutions even today, and the system that should generate indiscriminatory gains for all still produces disproportionate benefits to the already powerful companies, countries and groups of people.<sup>64</sup> This is what the BRICS countries have argued they want to change.

Indeed, the shortcomings of what in critical political economy literature is called the neo-liberal political economy, dearly 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, Duggan<sup>65</sup> and Mielniczuk<sup>66</sup> 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 don't.<sup>67</sup> It would appear that developmental concerns are one *mandala* where BRICS might be seen as an actor, where there is demand for a *vijigisu*, but where BRICS so far has not shown the necessary capacities to become one.

From a Kautilyan perspective, however, it appears that this *developmental mandala* is separate from how the BRICS relate to economic globalisation. While state influence over markets among BRICS countries is relatively extensive, BRICS have been and are major beneficiaries of economic globalisation and stout supporters of capitalism.<sup>68</sup> For example, BRICS lending to other developing countries is as extractive as investments from the advanced economies.<sup>69</sup> 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 (*Independent Online*, 10 June 2018). 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 per cent of borrowing quota, it must first seek structural adjustment loans from the IMF before it can receive more support from the CRA.<sup>70</sup>

Thus, while 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 very 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.<sup>71</sup> 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,<sup>72</sup> 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 at least so far failed to shoulder this responsibility even if it has created space in both developmental discourses and institutional structures.<sup>73</sup> 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 organise 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.<sup>74</sup> 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'.<sup>75</sup>

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'.<sup>76</sup> 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 and 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 become barriers for market access for developing countries. During the Trump presidency, 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'.<sup>77</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has two objectives. First, it has sought to develop conceptual tools to study international relations through an interpretative analysis of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. Second, it has tried to apply this perspective on conceptualising BRICS using the so-called BRICS paradox as a litmus test for the Kautilyan perspective. The short analysis of BRICS has demonstrated the applicability of the perspective.

In terms of the Kautilyan perspective, 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. This paper argues that one of the main types of contemporary *mandalas* can be defined as a strategic constellation of multiple and overlapping circles of political entities joined by transnationally intertwined state factors. This implies that state power and its interests are not territorially bound but transnationally intertwined. In this context, righteous conquest would denote successful leadership in optimising welfare in the interconnected political entities or among the peoples of transnationally intertwined states.

Both these findings seem to underline the analytical potential in this indigenous classic. In addition, and with regard to future research, I have mentioned in the introduction that this research provides a perspective that can 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'?

## Notes

1. Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm"; Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*; and Ikenberry, *After Victory*.
2. Graaff and Apeldoorn, "US-China Relations"; Chin, "Asian Infrastructure"; Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm"; and Tammen et al., *Power Transition*.
3. Drezner, "The System Worked"; Stephen, "Rising Powers"; and Ikenberry, "Why the Liberal World."
4. Acharya and Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory*.
5. Saran, "Globalisation"; Juutinen, "Leadership"; Thakur, "How Representative are BRICS"; and Stephen, "Emerging Powers."
6. Gallarotti, "Le Paradoxe Pragmatique."
7. Bond and Garcia, *Brics: An Anticapitalist Critique*; and Gudynas, "Beyond Varieties of Development."
8. Käkönen and Juutinen, "BRICS Paradox".
9. Ikenberry, "Why the Liberal World"; and Juutinen and Käkönen, *Battle for Globalisations*.
10. Tammen et al., *Power Transition*.
11. Juutinen and Käkönen, *Battle for Globalisations*; and Stephen, "Rising Powers."
12. Mastanduno, "A Realist View."
13. Ikenberry, "Why the Liberal World," 21.
14. Ikenberry, "Why the Liberal World," 19; and Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception*.
15. Saran, *How India Sees the World*; Khanna, *The Future is Asian*; and Alpers, *The Indian Ocean*.
16. Liebig, "Kautilya's Arthasasta."
17. See note 4 above.
18. Zaman, "Kautilya," 233–5; and Gautam, "Understanding Kautilya's Arthasasta," 74, 75.
19. Modelski, "Foreign Policy," 549, 550.
20. Gautam, "Understanding Kautilya's Arthasasta," 68.
21. Saran, *How India Sees the World*; Zaman, "Kautilya," 240; Modelski, "Foreign Policy," 550; and Olivelle, "Manu and the Arthasasta."
22. Farrelly, *An Introduction*, 9, 10; Philp, "Political Theory," 144–7; and Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 40, 41, 51.
23. Boesche, *The First Great*; Modelski, 'Foreign Policy'; and Sarkar, "Hindu Theory."
24. Gautam, "Understanding Kautilya's Arthasasta," 72; Modelski, "Foreign Policy," 550; and Saran, *How India Sees the World*, 9–12.
25. Pande, *From Chanakya to Modi*; Saran, *How India Sees the World*; and Ayres, *Our Time Has Come*.
26. E.g., Wæver, "The Sociology."
27. Hobson, "The Eurocentric Conception"; Ikenberry, "Why the Liberal World," 19.
28. Pijl, *The Discipline of Western Supremacy*.
29. Acharya and Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory*; Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception*; and Pijl, *The Discipline of Western Supremacy*.
30. Krishna, *Globalization and Postcolonialism*.
31. Nau, "Introduction."
32. Shahi, *Kautilya and Non-Western IR*.
33. E.g., Rich, *To Uphold the World*.
34. Bilgin, "Thinking past 'Western' IR".
35. Acharya, "Dialogue and Discovery."
36. Hobson, *Eastern Origins*.
37. Bilgin, "Thinking Past 'Western' IR"; Acharya, and Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory*; Acharya, "Dialogue and Discovery"; and Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception*.
38. Sarkar, "Hindu Theory"; Modelski, "Foreign Policy"; Boesche, *The First Great*; Zaman, "Kautilya"; Gautam, *One Hundred Years*, Ch.3; Liebig, "Kautilya's Arthasasta"; Mitra and Liebig, *Kautilya's Arthasasta*; and Juutinen, "Kautilyan Foreign Policy Analysis," 5–10.

39. Gautam, *One Hundred Years*, 51; Liebig, "Kautilya's Arthasasta," 6, 8, 10; and Mitra and Liebig, *Kautilya's Arthasasta*. 127; Juutinen, "Kautilyan Foreign Policy Analysis," 210.
40. Shamastry, *Kautilya's Arthasastra*, 367.
41. *Ibid.*, 366, 367; and Gautam, *One Hundred Years*, 54, 55.
42. E.g., Modelski, "Foreign Policy," 550; and Boesche, *The First*, 16.
43. Shamastry, *Kautilya's Arthasastra*, 366; and Boesche, *The First*, 78.
44. Gautam, *One Hundred Years*, 99; and Sarkar, "Hindu Theory," 405.
45. Liebig, "Kautilya's Arthasāstra," 3, 4.
46. Mitra and Liebig, *Kautilya's Arthasasta*, 127, 132; Shamastry, *Kautilya's Arthasastra*, 368; and Rangarajan, *Kautilya*, 525.
47. Ramachandran, "Sun Zi and Kautilya," 393.
48. Shamastry, *Kautilya's Arthasastra*, 52.
49. *Ibid.*, 446.
50. Liebig, "Kautilya's Arthasāstra," 10; and Juutinen and Käkönen, *Battle for Globalisations*, 17.
51. Shamastry, *Kautilya's Arthasastra*, 362.
52. Boesche, *The First*, 45, 62.
53. World Economic Forum, <http://reports.weforum.org/global-competitiveness-report-2014-2015/methodology/>. Accessed on 15 February 2019.
54. Boesche, *The First*, 106–8.
55. Rangarajan, *Kautilya*, 29, 37, 38; and Shamastry, *Kautilya's Arthasastra*, 9, 10.
56. Compare, Juutinen, "Kautilyan Foreign Policy Analysis," 8, 9.
57. Saran, *How India Sees the World*.
58. Sarkar, "Hindu Theory," 401, 409; Boesche, *The First*, 4, 79; Liebig, "Kautilya's Arthasasta," 15; and Gautam, *One Hundred Years*, 124.
59. Shamastry, *Kautilya's Arthasastra*, 1, 19, 51, 362.
60. *Ibid.*, 366; and Gautam, *One Hundred Years*, 47, 56.
61. Liebig, "Kautilya's Arthasāstra," 14.
62. See *Ibid.*, 14, 17.
63. BRICS, *Joint Statement*, 2nd BRIC Summit, 2010, nos. 1, 2.
64. Hopewell, *Breaking the WTO*.
65. Duggan, "BRICS and the Evolution."
66. Mielniczuk, "BRICS in the Contemporary World."
67. Babb, "The Washington Consensus"; and Gudynas, "Beyond Varieties of Development."
68. Stephen, "Rising Powers"; and Nölke et al., "Domestic Structures."
69. Bond, "BRICS Banking".
70. *Ibid.*; also Bond and Garcia, *Brics: Anti-Capitalist Critique*.
71. See note 66 above.
72. NDB, *General Strategy*, 11.
73. Juutinen, "Leadership".
74. G20, Declaration.
75. *BRICS Ufa Declaration*, no. 19.
76. *BRICS Fortaleza Declaration*, nos. 8, 27; *BRICS Goa Declaration*, no. 9; and *BRICS Xiamen Declaration*, no. 38.
77. *BRICS Johannesburg Declaration*, no. 64.

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## Notes on contributor

**Marko Juutinen** is completing doctoral research on legitimacy of trade governance at Tampere University. Previously he was Visiting Researcher at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi, and at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs. He is co-author (with Jyrki Käkönen) of *Battle for Globalisations? BRICS and US Mega-Regional Trade Agreements in a Changing World Order* (New Delhi, 2016), and has published in the *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* and Finnish scientific journals. His most recent research includes 'From Competitive to Inclusive Regionalisms: Mega-Regional Geo-Economics and the Legitimacy of World Trade System', in *Revisiting Regionalism and the New World Order* (Barbara Budrich, forthcoming), 'BRICS Paradox' (with Jyrki Käkönen), in *BRICS Framing a New Global Communication Order?* (Routledge, forthcoming), and 'Leadership for a Pluralistic Order? Assessing BRICS and Development Finance', in *Leading Change in a Complex World: Transdisciplinary Perspectives* (Tampere University Press, 2019).

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