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"Kautilya's Arthashastra and the Architecture of Contemporary Indian Foreign Policy: Continuities, Adaptations, and Strategic Resonance"

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Abstract

This paper examines the enduring relevance of Kautilya's political philosophy, as articulated in the Arthashastra, to the conduct of Indian foreign policy in the twenty-first century. Composed approximately 2,300 years ago and attributed to the philosopher-minister Chanakya, the Arthashastra remains one of the most sophisticated treatises on statecraft, diplomacy, and political realism in world history. The central argument advanced here is that, despite the transformation of the international order from the competing territorial kingdoms of ancient India to a globalised, multipolar world, the strategic principles embedded in Kautilyan thought continue to inform and, in certain instances, structurally shape India's diplomatic behaviour. Drawing on primary textual analysis of the Arthashastra alongside secondary literature on Indian foreign policy, the paper traces the presence of Kautilyan concepts including the mandala theory of concentric enmity and alliance, the doctrine of saptanga (the seven constituent elements of state power), the fourfold policy instruments of sama, dana, bheda, and danda, and the strategic pursuit of artha across key foreign policy episodes: India's neighbourhood policy, its approach to great power competition, energy and economic diplomacy, and its calibrated engagement with multilateral institutions. The paper further contends that the current administration's foreign policy posture reflects a deliberate articulation of Kautilyan realism expressed through the language of contemporary multilateralism, offering a case study in the civilisational underpinning of strategic culture.

Keywords: Kautilya, Arthashastra, Indian Foreign Policy, Strategic Culture, Mandala Theory, Realism, Neighbourhood Policy

1. Introduction

In the vast canon of classical political thought, few texts rival the Arthashastra of Kautilya in the sheer range and practical depth of its strategic counsel. Composed around the fourth century BCE and addressed to the Mauryan emperor Chandragupta, the text articulates with remarkable precision a theory of statecraft that anticipates many of the central concerns of modern international relations: the primacy of national interest, the balance of power, the instrumental use of diplomacy, and the managed deployment of coercion (Kangle, 1988; Rangarajan, 1992). For students of Indian civilisation and strategic thought, the Arthashastra is not merely a historical curiosity it is, in many quarters, regarded as the foundational charter of Indian realpolitik.

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The question of whether ancient texts genuinely inform modern foreign policy, or whether such connections are primarily rhetorical and post-hoc, is a live and contested one in the study of strategic culture. This paper takes the position that both possibilities coexist in the Indian case. The Kautilyan inheritance operates at multiple levels simultaneously: as a source of conceptual grammar for Indian strategic thinkers; as a framework invoked deliberately by policymakers to lend civilisational legitimacy to strategic choices; and as an underlying logic that independently aligns with the realist imperatives that any significant state confronts in the contemporary international system.

The paper proceeds in seven sections. Section 2 provides an overview of the Arthashastra's principal concepts relevant to foreign policy. Section 3 situates Kautilyan thought within the broader discourse on Indian strategic culture. Section 4 examines the presence of Kautilyan principles in India's neighbourhood policy. Section 5 traces Kautilyan resonances in India's great power diplomacy. Section 6 addresses the economic and multilateral dimensions of Indian foreign policy through a Kautilyan lens. Section 7 offers a critical assessment of the framework's explanatory limits. The paper concludes with a reflective synthesis.

The Arthashastra: Core Concepts and Their Diplomatic Significance

The Rajamandala: A Theory of Concentric Enmity and Alliance

The most analytically durable concept in the Arthashastra for the study of international relations is the mandala the circle of states. Kautilya proposed that any ruler occupying a given territory (the vijigishu, or the king who desires conquest) is surrounded by a structured spatial arrangement of friends and adversaries. The immediate neighbour is a natural enemy, since contiguous states share borders and therefore competing territorial interests. The state beyond the immediate neighbour is a natural ally, since they share a common adversary (Rangarajan, 1992, p. 542). This alternating pattern of enmity and alliance extends outward in concentric circles, generating a dynamic model of the regional security environment.

The mandala theory is not merely descriptive; it is inherently prescriptive, instructing the vijigishu on whom to cultivate, whom to neutralise, and whom to bring under indirect influence. Kautilya is explicit that alliances are instruments of statecraft, not ends in themselves — they are to be made, sustained, or broken in accordance with the shifting imperatives of national power and strategic interest (Boesche, 2002, p. 57). This pragmatism places him firmly within what modern international relations scholars would identify as the realist tradition.

The Saptanga: Seven Pillars of State Power

Alongside the mandala, the Arthashastra delineates the saptanga the seven constituent elements of a state whose relative strength determines its capacity to pursue foreign policy objectives. These elements are: the king (svamin), ministers (amatya), the realm or territory (janapada), the fortified

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capital (durga), the treasury (kosha), military force (danda), and allies (mitra) (Kangle, 1988, Vol. I). Kautilya stresses the interdependence of these elements: a powerful treasury without capable military force remains vulnerable; a strong army without treasury resources cannot be sustained; and diplomacy without the credible backing of danda is mere rhetoric.

This systemic view of state power anticipates what contemporary international relations theory designates as comprehensive national power the aggregation of economic, military, diplomatic, and institutional capabilities that determine a state's relative position in the international system. For analysts of Indian foreign policy, the saptanga offers a useful framework for understanding why India's diplomatic posture was historically constrained by economic weakness, and why the expansion of its economic and military capabilities since the 1991 liberalisation has been accompanied by a markedly more assertive diplomatic identity (Pant, 2016).

The Fourfold Instrument: Sama, Dana, Bheda, Danda

Kautilya identifies four instruments of state policy sama (conciliation and dialogue), dana (material inducement), bheda (sowing dissension and division among adversaries), and danda (force or coercion). These instruments are to be deployed in sequence or combination, depending on the nature of the adversary and the stakes involved. The text is unambiguous that danda the use of force is appropriate when other means fail, but equally clear that the wise ruler avoids reaching for coercion prematurely, since war is expensive, uncertain, and often counterproductive (Rangarajan, 1992, pp. 108–112).

This graduated approach to coercion has clear parallels in the modern concept of escalation management and reflects a sophisticated understanding of the costs and benefits of different foreign policy instruments. In practice, India's engagement with neighbouring states has frequently cycled through these four modes: diplomatic overtures followed by economic incentives, the use of information operations and political influence, and the ultimate backstop of military pressure or intervention.

Strategic Culture and the Kautilyan Inheritance in India

The concept of strategic culture the set of beliefs, assumptions, and modes of behaviour derived from a state's historical experience and cultural milieu that shape how its political elites approach questions of national security and foreign policy has been applied to the Indian case with varying degrees of analytical rigour. Bajpai (2002) argues that Indian strategic culture is best understood as a plural and contested phenomenon, incorporating Nehruvian idealism, Hindu nationalist realism, and commercial liberalism as distinct and competing orientations. Others, including Mohan (2006) and Saran (2017), argue for a more coherent underlying realism in Indian strategic behaviour, whose clearest classical expression is to be found in Kautilya.

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The invocation of Kautilya in contemporary Indian strategic discourse has intensified considerably since the early 2000s. The establishment of the Chanakya Defence Dialogue, the incorporation of Kautilyan texts into the curricula of India's premier defence and diplomatic training institutions, and the explicit references to the Arthashastra in speeches by senior officials all indicate a deliberate effort to ground contemporary Indian strategic thought in a civilisational heritage that pre-dates the European Westphalian tradition. This is not merely performative: it reflects a genuine attempt to construct an autonomous Indian theoretical framework for foreign policy that does not merely reproduce Western international relations theory.

India's current foreign policy leadership has been notably self-conscious about the Kautilyan dimensions of its diplomatic posture. Officials and commentators have drawn attention to continuities between Kautilyan statecraft and the neighbourhood-first policy, the pursuit of multi-alignment, and the deployment of economic diplomacy as a tool of strategic influence (Saran, 2017). Whether these connections represent a direct causal chain or a more diffuse cultural affinity is difficult to establish with certainty. The frequency and deliberateness of the references, however, suggests that Kautilyan concepts have genuine agenda-setting significance in contemporary Indian strategic debates.

The Neighbourhood: Mandala Theory in Practice

Pakistan: The Doctrine of the Adversarial Neighbour

Few bilateral relationships in Indian foreign policy illustrate the Kautilyan logic of the natural adversary more plainly than India's relationship with Pakistan. The two states have fought four wars, engaged in persistent sub-conventional conflict through proxy channels, and have been unable to resolve the foundational territorial dispute over Kashmir despite decades of negotiations. From a Kautilyan standpoint, this structural enmity is not anomalous but expected: Pakistan, as India's immediate western neighbour, occupies the position of the ari (enemy) in the mandala framework.

India's policy toward Pakistan has cycled through all four of Kautilya's instruments. Diplomatic engagement (sama) has been attempted at multiple historical junctures — the Simla Agreement of 1972, the Lahore Declaration of 1999, the composite dialogue of the early 2000s, and the brief diplomatic thaw in 2015. Economic inducements (dana) have been extended in the form of preferential trade proposals, though Pakistan's domestic political constraints have consistently limited their uptake. Covert political activities aimed at sowing division (bheda) are alleged by Pakistan to be ongoing. The use of calibrated military force (danda) has been demonstrated most recently in the 2016 surgical strikes across the Line of Control following the Uri attack, and in the 2019 Balakot air strikes following the Pulwama bombing.

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The Balakot episode is particularly instructive from a Kautilyan standpoint. The Indian strike was calibrated to inflict demonstrable punishment while stopping well short of provoking all-out war a direct illustration of the principle that danda must be proportionate, purposive, and accompanied by clear signalling. The subsequent de-escalation, managed partly through third-party mediation and partly through mutual restraint, reflected the Kautilyan wisdom that even in adversarial relationships, the complete destruction of an adversary is rarely strategically optimal (Ganguly & Thompson, 2011).

China: Managing the Rival in the Mandala

If Pakistan represents the acute adversarial challenge in India's regional environment, China represents the more complex structural challenge of a large, powerful, and increasingly assertive neighbour with whom India shares a long disputed border but also deep economic interdependence. The Kautilyan framework offers instructive insights here, though the relationship's complexity and asymmetry also expose certain limitations of the classical model.

From a mandala perspective, China is India's most formidable neighbour and, therefore, its most structurally significant adversary. Yet the relationship resists simple categorisation. Bilateral trade reached approximately USD 136 billion in 2022, making China India's largest trading partner by several metrics, even as the two militaries engaged in deadly clashes along the Line of Actual Control in the Galwan Valley in June 2020. India's response — restricting Chinese investment, banning Chinese mobile applications, and accelerating border infrastructure — reflects a Kautilyan calculus of deploying economic and technological instruments in parallel with military posturing, without allowing any single instrument to determine the overall relationship.

India's engagement with the Quad the quadrilateral security dialogue involving India, the United States, Japan, and Australia may also be read through a Kautilyan lens as an exercise in cultivating the natural alliance of states beyond China's immediate periphery. By aligning with states that share a common strategic interest in limiting Chinese dominance of the Indo-Pacific, India applies the mandala logic of the natural ally. That this alignment is expressed in the language of rules-based order and democratic solidarity rather than in explicit balance-of-power terms reflects a modern diplomatic necessity: realist imperatives must today be clothed in multilateral language.

Smaller Neighbours: Sama, Dana, and the Limits of Hegemonic Benevolence

India's relationships with the smaller states of its immediate neighbourhood Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Bhutan illustrate both the utility and the limits of Kautilyan statecraft in settings where power asymmetry is acute. India's neighbourhood-first policy, which predates the current administration but has been articulated with greater vigour since 2014, reflects the Kautilyan imperative to consolidate influence within the inner mandala before projecting power outward.

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The approach has yielded mixed results. In Bangladesh, the bilateral relationship benefited substantially from alignment of strategic interests, particularly in the domain of security cooperation and economic connectivity. India's decisive role in Bangladesh's independence in 1971 remains foundational to this relationship, illustrating the Kautilyan principle that material assistance (dana) can generate durable strategic obligations. The political transition of August 2024 and the fall of the Hasina government represented a significant setback for Indian influence, exposing the vulnerability of policies heavily reliant on personal relationships with individual leaders rather than on structural institutional ties.

In Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, India has periodically encountered the backlash of smaller-state nationalism against perceived Indian dominance what political scientists term the 'India factor' in domestic politics. The Arthashastra implicitly acknowledges this dynamic, noting that an overlord who imposes his preferences too visibly generates resistance. The wise vijigishu maintains influence through indirect means, allowing client states the outward appearance of autonomy. India's management of Bhutan in which it exercises close oversight of foreign and defence policy while granting Bhutan formal sovereignty and considerable economic support — approximates this model most closely.

Great Power Diplomacy: Multi-Alignment as Kautilyan Strategy

Strategic Autonomy and the Doctrine of Multi-Alignment

One of the most consistent features of Indian foreign policy across governments has been the commitment to strategic autonomy the refusal to align exclusively with any single great power or bloc, and the insistence on retaining freedom to pursue national interests without external constraint. This principle was articulated in Nehruvian terms as non-alignment during the Cold War and has since been reformulated as multi-alignment or strategic multi-polarity.

From a Kautilyan standpoint, strategic autonomy is not an idealistic abstraction but a supremely pragmatic calculation. The vijigishu is counselled never to become dependent upon a single ally, since dependence creates vulnerability. The capable ruler instead cultivates multiple relationships simultaneously, playing them against one another when necessary and extracting maximum benefit from each. India's simultaneous maintenance of defence partnerships with the United States, Russia, France, and Israel even as these states compete among themselves — is a textbook illustration of this strategic logic.

The purchase of Russian S-400 missile defence systems despite substantial American pressure, India's continued engagement with Russia following its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and its simultaneous deepening of defence cooperation with the United States through the signing of foundational bilateral agreements all reflect the Kautilyan calculus of extracting strategic benefit from multiple relationships without allowing any one to foreclose future options. India's

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abstentions on United Nations resolutions condemning Russian actions in Ukraine were diplomatically costly in terms of Western public opinion, but served the Kautilyan interest of preserving the Russian relationship as a strategic hedge.

The United States: Between Partnership and Dependence

The trajectory of India–US relations since the signing of the civil nuclear agreement in 2008 represents the most significant structural shift in Indian foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. The agreement, which brought India into the global nuclear mainstream despite its status as a non-signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, reflected both American strategic interest in cultivating India as a counterweight to China and Indian skill in leveraging its strategic position to extract concessions without accepting formal alliance obligations.

From a Kautilyan standpoint, the management of the American relationship has been an exercise in maximising dana the benefits of material and technical assistance while resisting the conditions that might compromise strategic autonomy. India has accepted American defence equipment, intelligence-sharing arrangements, and diplomatic support on specific issues while declining to commit to mutual defence obligations, to host American military bases, or to subordinate its China policy to American preferences. The articulation of India as a 'leading power' rather than a junior partner in the Indo-Pacific reflects the Kautilyan insistence that even the most significant ally relationship must be structured to preserve the vijigishu's freedom of manoeuvre.

Russia: The Durable Legacy of Strategic Alignment

India's relationship with Russia rooted in the Soviet-era Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation of 1971 has demonstrated remarkable durability despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, the radical transformation of the Russian state, and the severe deterioration of Russia's international standing following the Ukraine invasion. From a liberal internationalist perspective, India's continued engagement with Russia is difficult to explain. From a Kautilyan perspective, it is entirely consistent: Russia remains a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, a major supplier of defence equipment, a strategic partner in Central Asia, and an important buffer against any attempt by Western states to apply coordinated diplomatic pressure on India.

The Kautilyan concept of the ally who is neither too powerful nor excessively dependent also illuminates why Russia retains value even in decline. A weakened Russia is a more manageable partner, less capable of imposing its preferences on India. The continued purchase of Russian petroleum at discounted prices following Western sanctions oil that India subsequently refined and exported to European markets reflects a clear application of dana logic: converting existing strategic relationships into economic advantage while maintaining strategic ambiguity about the normative dimensions of the conflict.

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Economic Diplomacy and Multilateral Engagement

Kosha as Strategy: Economic Power and Foreign Policy

The Arthashastra's emphasis on kosha the treasury as a fundamental pillar of state power has a direct contemporary translation in the preoccupation with economic statecraft. Kautilya was explicit that military power and diplomatic influence ultimately depend on the productive capacity of the state, and that the ruler must attend carefully to economic growth, the regulation of trade, and the accumulation of resources. A depleted treasury renders the state vulnerable to coercion and unreliable as an ally (Rangarajan, 1992, p. 212).

Post-liberalisation India has progressively embraced economic diplomacy as a central instrument of foreign policy. The projection of India as an emerging market and investment destination, the pursuit of bilateral and regional free trade agreements, and the construction of physical connectivity infrastructure across South Asia and Southeast Asia all reflect the Kautilyan logic of deploying economic instruments to build strategic relationships and expand zones of influence. The International Solar Alliance, launched jointly with France at COP21 in 2015, is one illustration of using the global climate agenda to position India as a leader of the developing world leveraging comparative advantage in solar resources to build a diplomatic coalition that serves both environmental and strategic objectives.

The Belt and Road Initiative and India's Response

China's Belt and Road Initiative the vast infrastructure investment and connectivity programme that by 2024 encompasses more than 140 countries represents perhaps the most expansive contemporary application of Kautilyan economic statecraft by any single state. By deploying capital and technical assistance to construct infrastructure across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, China has created economic dependencies that translate into political influence — dana deployed at civilisational scale.

India's response has been instructive. India remains the only major regional power to have explicitly declined to endorse the initiative, citing its objections to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor passing through Pakistani-administered Kashmir as a violation of Indian sovereignty. This refusal has been accompanied by the development of alternative connectivity initiatives — the International North-South Transport Corridor linking India with Iran and Russia, the Chabahar port development in Iran, and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor announced at the G20 summit in New Delhi in 2023 (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). These counter-connectivity efforts reflect the Kautilyan principle of bheda: undermining an adversary's strategic infrastructure by building alternative networks that reduce other states' dependency on that adversary.

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India and Multilateralism: Selective Engagement with Global Institutions

India's relationship with multilateral institutions and the rules-based international order more broadly reflects a distinctly Kautilyan ambivalence. On one hand, India has been an active participant in and often a strong advocate for the United Nations system, the World Trade Organisation, and various regional bodies. On the other hand, India has consistently resisted sovereignty constraints imposed through multilateral instruments from its refusal to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty to its reservations about the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism.

This selective multilateralism is consistent with the Kautilyan framework: institutions are to be used when they serve the vijigishu's interests and resisted when they impose costs. India's leadership of the G20 in 2023 during which it successfully convened a consensus summit despite the Russia–Ukraine conflict and elevated the concerns of the Global South by securing the inclusion of the African Union as a permanent member reflected Kautilyan mastery of multilateral forums as platforms for advancing national interests while projecting the image of a responsible global leader (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2023).

The articulation of Vishwamitra (friend of the world) and Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family) as organising concepts for the G20 presidency represented a sophisticated use of sama deploying the language of universal solidarity to advance the particular interests of a rising power seeking to position itself as the voice of the developing world in global governance structures.

Critical Assessment: The Limits of the Kautilyan Framework

Any analysis of Kautilyan influence on contemporary Indian foreign policy must engage seriously with alternative explanations for Indian strategic behaviour and with the significant ways in which the contemporary international environment differs from the ancient Indian polity system that Kautilya theorised. Three critical observations deserve particular attention.

First, the invocation of Kautilya in Indian strategic discourse is often as ideological as it is analytical. The association of Kautilyan statecraft with a particular vision of civilisational heritage means that references to the Arthashastra in official discourse carry political valence that may distort their analytical content. When a government official cites Chanakya's wisdom to justify a specific policy, the citation may be performing cultural legitimation as much as articulating genuine strategic reasoning. Analysts must accordingly distinguish between Kautilyan concepts as explanatory tools and their deployment as legitimating rhetoric a distinction that is not always straightforward.

Second, the Arthashastra was composed for a world of competing territorial kingdoms in the Gangetic plain, where the primary concern was the physical security and expansion of a single ruler's realm. The contemporary Indian state operates under conditions of nuclear deterrence,

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globalised supply chains, transnational ideological movements, and multilateral institutional constraints that Kautilya could not have anticipated. Several of his more specific prescriptions including advice on assassination, the use of provocateurs, and various forms of covert subversion are either prohibited under contemporary international law or politically impracticable in an era of media transparency and democratic accountability.

Third, Indian foreign policy is shaped by numerous influences beyond the Kautilyan inheritance: the Nehruvian tradition of moral leadership and multilateralism, the institutional legacies of British colonial administration, the pressures of domestic coalition politics, and the constraints imposed by India's developmental priorities and economic vulnerabilities. A monocausal explanation that attributes Indian strategic behaviour primarily to Kautilyan influence risks what might be termed civilisational essentialism the assumption that ancient texts determine contemporary behaviour in a relatively direct and unmediated fashion (Bajpai, 2002).

These qualifications notwithstanding, the case for Kautilyan resonance in Indian foreign policy remains persuasive at the level of structural logic. Even in the absence of conscious reference to the Arthashastra, a powerful state confronting a complex regional environment of adversarial neighbours, asymmetric relationships, and great power competition would likely arrive, by force of circumstance, at strategic postures that closely resemble what Kautilya prescribed. The Arthashastra is valuable not only as a text that may have influenced Indian strategic culture, but as a remarkably prescient framework for capturing the enduring logic of statecraft in an anarchic international system.

Conclusion

Taken together, the foregoing analysis demonstrates that Kautilya's Arthashastra constitutes a living intellectual resource for understanding contemporary Indian foreign policy one that operates simultaneously at the levels of conceptual grammar, strategic culture, and structural logic. The mandala theory illuminates India's neighbourhood relationships and its management of great power competition; the saptanga framework explains the connection between India's growing comprehensive national power and its more assertive diplomatic identity; the fourfold instrument of sama, dana, bheda, and danda accounts for India's graduated approach to coercion and engagement; and the overarching Kautilyan emphasis on artha aligns with India's post-liberalisation investment in economic statecraft as the foundation of geopolitical influence.

What is equally clear from this analysis, however, is that the Arthashastra does not offer a complete or unmediated explanation of Indian foreign policy. India's diplomatic choices are shaped by a rich and sometimes contradictory inheritance that includes Nehruvian idealism, constitutional commitments, and the pressures of democratic politics alongside Kautilyan realism. The tensions between India's realist strategic behaviour and its normative commitments to multilateralism, democratic solidarity, and the rules-based order reflect a genuine and unresolved tension within

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the Kautilyan framework itself between the ethics of statecraft and the imperatives of power (Mohan, 2006; Saran, 2017).

As India continues its ascent toward major power status, the Kautilyan inheritance is likely to remain both a strategic resource and a diplomatic constraint. The unabashed pragmatism of the Arthashastra provides sophisticated conceptual vocabulary for navigating an increasingly multipolar and contested international environment. At the same time, the normative expectations that accompany India's growing global role as a champion of the Global South, as a functional democracy, and as a responsible nuclear state sit uneasily with the more ruthless prescriptions of Chanakya. Managing this tension between the calculated pragmatism of the Arthashastra and the moral internationalism associated with Ashoka; between the logic of the mandala and the aspiration to Vishwamitra may prove to be the defining diplomatic challenge of India's rise.1

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