



International journal of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research

ISSN 2456-4567 (O)

Kautilyanism: The Four Upayas in Indian Foreign Policy (2014–2026)

Sukhen Baidya

Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Centre for Studies in Social Sciences,
Calcutta, West Bengal, India

Abstract: This research explores the profound resurgence of Kautilyan realism in contemporary Indian foreign policy during Modi Era . As India navigates a polarized and uncertain global order, it has pivoted from a traditional stance of "Strategic Hesitation" toward a proactive "India First" approach. Utilizing Kautilya's Chaturvidha Upaya as a primary theoretical framework, the study examines how modern statecraft synthesizes ancient wisdom with 21st-century "Smart Power" to achieve strategic autonomy. The analysis demonstrates that Sama is manifested through cultural branding and Digital Public Infrastructure, establishing India as a "Civilizational State." Dana has evolved into robust developmental partnerships and "Vaccine Maitri," positioning India as a reliable "First Responder" and the voice of the Global South. Bheda facilitates a sophisticated "Multi-alignment" strategy, allowing India to maintain a delicate balance between competing major powers while protecting its national interest. Finally, Danda underpins these diplomatic efforts with a credible hard-power deterrence, exemplified by proactive defense measures such as Operation Sindoor and the technological advancement of the nuclear triad. The research further provides a critical evaluation of this "Neo-Kautilyan" era, comparing ancient realist tactics with the constraints of modern international law and democratic values. It concludes that India's quest for "Leading Power" status is driven by a unique moral and strategic synthesis, proving that Kautilyan principles remain the eternal DNA of India's strategic thinking. By 2026, this integration of ancient pragmatism and modern diplomacy has established India as an indispensable and stabilizing force in a multipolar world.

Keywords: Kautilyan Realism, Strategic Autonomy, Modi Era Diplomacy, Chaturvidha Upaya, Leading Power status.



Introduction

As 21st-century geopolitics traverses multifaceted polarization, modern states increasingly look toward historical and cultural roots to define foreign policy. In India, this has triggered an intellectual renaissance of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), centered on Kautilya. His Arthashastra is viewed not merely as an ancient text but as an eternal sourcebook of Realpolitik. Roger Boesche identifies Kautilya as the world's first great "political realist," rivaling Thucydides or Machiavelli. According to Medha Bisht and Kajari Kamal, Indian foreign policy has evolved beyond Western Liberalism to embrace a unique "Strategic Culture" steeped in Kautilyan realism. The 2014 ascension of Prime Minister Narendra Modi marked a milestone in this evolution. Dr. S. Jaishankar, in *The India Way and Why Bharat Matters*, argues that India is shedding its long-standing "Strategic Hesitation" to become a confident, wise power. Modi era represents a "Neo-Kautilyan" era where, as Aparna Pande notes, national interest and realism take precedence over idealism. Consequently, India now presents itself globally not just as a regional actor, but as a "Leading Power" and "Vishwa-Mitra" (Friend of the World). Kautilya's Arthashastra identifies four primary means to achieve state objectives: Sama (Conciliation), Dana (Gifts/Aid), Bheda (Maneuvering), and Danda (Force). In modern terms, these constitute "Smart Power"-a skillful blend of soft and hard power. This research analyzes the modern application of these ancient means between 2014 and 2026. Insights from Harsh V. Pant and Shivshankar Menon indicate that India's decision-making is now increasingly multi-aligned. India leads through Sama via diplomatic dialogues at platforms like the G20, while employing Dana through "Vaccine Maitri" and economic assistance. Simultaneously, India demonstrates Danda through military proactive measures against terrorism and border threats, as evidenced by Operation Sindoor, the Balakot air strikes, and surgical strikes.

Research Gap & Originality

Most studies view Kautilya historically; this research analyzes the 2014-2026 period using the "Four Upayas" framework. It marks India's evolution from David Malone's "slow rise" toward asserting "Strategic Autonomy." Modern foreign policy is a deliberate Kautilyan continuation. By balancing Sama (cultural/digital), Dana (economic/humanitarian), and Bheda (strategic maneuvering) over direct Danda (military force), India has established itself as an essential global power.



Conceptual Framework

This study bridges **Kautilya's Upayas** with **Joseph Nye's "Smart Power"** by mapping Sama/Dana to Soft Power and Bheda/Danda to Hard Power. This synthesis provides the theoretical basis for understanding India's emergence as a leading global power.

The Kautilyan Quadrad: A Synthesis of 4 Upayas in Modi's Foreign policy

In the 21st century's global politics, a modern and multidimensional application of Kautilya's 'Sama' policy is observed behind India's rise as a 'Civilizational State,' which essentially ensures India's dominance and acceptability on the world stage through attraction, persuasion, and cultural messaging. Although the strategy of 'Sama' or conciliation described in Kautilya's 'Arthashastra' is termed 'Soft Power' in modern diplomatic parlance, during the Modi era (2014-2026), it has been transformed from a passive ideal into a well-planned 'Strategic Culture.' Judging by Dr. S. Jaishankar's *The India Way* and Kajari Kamal's *Strategic Cultural Roots of India's Contemporary Statecraft*, it is evident that India is now using its ancient wisdom as a powerful tool to tackle the uncertainties of the global order. The most visible manifestation of this 'Sama' policy is cultural diplomacy and global branding like International Yoga Day, through which India has given a universal form to its spiritual and cultural heritage; similarly, by making the Buddhist religious circuit and Buddhist diplomacy a part of its 'Act East' policy, India has established a deep strategic connection with the countries of South and East Asia, which in Roger Boesche's description is an effort to create a 'realist cultural hegemony.' Furthermore, according to the observations of Aparna Pande and T.V. Paul, India is using its vast Diaspora as a 'strategic asset,' where events like 'Howdy Modi' or 'Namaste Trump' have developed the Diaspora not just as an emotional connection but as a powerful lobby to protect India's interests in respective countries. The unique height of India's 'Sama' policy was reflected during the 2023 G20 presidency, where the mantra of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' or 'The World is One Family' acted not just as a slogan, but as an effort to create a unified narrative in a polarized world. T.V. Paul, in his book *The Unfinished Quest*, analyzes India's 'Status Seeking' and shows that India has established itself as the voice of the 'Global South' or the developing world, thereby becoming a claimant to moral and diplomatic leadership on the world stage. Additionally, a very important and new addition to modern India's 'Sama' strategy is the sharing of technologies like 'Digital Public Infrastructure' (DPI) or UPI with other countries, proving that India's democracy and values are not limited to governance methods but are a unique soft power dedicated to the service of humanity through technological excellence. According to Shivshankar Menon and Harsh V. Pant, India is now presenting itself as a 'Rule-maker' rather than a 'Rule-taker,' and in this process, India's emergence as the 'Mother of Democracy' ensures its seat at the discussion table on the world



stage. In this diplomatic journey, the 'Sama' policy has created not just good relations with neighbors, but a kind of 'Strategic Comfort' and a 'Vishwa-mitra' (Friend of the World) image globally, which provides a universal moral cover to India's hard power or military capabilities and transforms ancient Kautilyan philosophy into an essential and original model for 21st-century modern diplomacy.

The policy of 'Dana' or 'Upapradana' described in Kautilya's 'Arthashastra' has evolved in 21st-century Indian diplomacy beyond a mere donor-recipient relationship into a powerful and moral framework of 'Development Partnership,' which has paved the way for India to become a 'Vishwa Mitra' (Friend of the World) in the foreign policy of the 'Modi Era' (2014-2026). Where Kautilya saw 'Dana' as a strategy to appease the discontent of adversaries and ensure the loyalty of allies, modern India is applying it as a global reflection of 'Human-centric Globalization' and the philosophy of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas.' Following the core theme of Dr. S. Jaishankar's *The India Way and Why Bharat Matters*, it is observed that India is no longer a seeker-state but is establishing its moral dominance on the world stage as a 'Donor State,' which T.V. Paul, in his book *The Unfinished Quest*, has identified as a primary pillar of India's 'Status Seeking' and emergence as a 'Bridging Power.' The most bright and global example of this 'Dana' policy is 'Vaccine Maitri,' through which India demonstrated a unique 'Kautilyan generosity' by sending over 163 million doses of vaccines to more than 100 countries during the extreme crisis of the pandemic; this is essentially a modern theoretical synthesis of Joseph Nye's soft power with Kautilya's 'Dana' method. Regarding neighboring countries, India's policy has become more consolidated and infrastructure-centric, where the construction of the Parliament building and Salma Dam in Afghanistan, post-earthquake reconstruction in Nepal, and the undertaking of developmental projects worth several billion dollars through the 3rd and 4th Line of Credit (LoC) in Bangladesh represent the successful implementation of India's 'Neighborhood First' policy. Particularly during the unprecedented economic crisis in Sri Lanka in 2022, the way India provided emergency financial assistance of approximately 4 billion USD, fuel, and medicines, is-according to Kajari Kamal's *Strategic Cultural Roots* and Harsh V. Pant's analysis-an incomparable and timely application of the modern 'Dana' policy which not only stabilized the neighbor but also secured India's strategic dominance in the Indian Ocean region. This economic diplomacy of India is not solely dependent on debt; rather, it has elevated India's Line of Credit (LoC) portfolio to nearly 30 billion USD, extending beyond South Asia to Africa and the Pacific region. Additionally, 'Operation Dost' (2023) (relief for the earthquake in Turkey and Syria), 'Operation Karuna' (2023) (assistance following Cyclone Mocha in Myanmar), and the sharing of 'Digital Public Infrastructure' (DPI) with countries of the Global South in recent years-all prove that India has now built a reliable image as a 'First Responder.' Modern India is breaking the mold of the 'strategic autonomy' metaphor used by Shivshankar Menon, presenting its 'Dana'



policy as a transparent and sustainable model that stands as an attractive alternative to China's 'Debt Trap' diplomacy. India's developmental diplomacy is not just an exchange of money, but through 'Knowledge Sharing' and 'Technological Partnership,' it is ensuring India's seat as an essential and influential member of the world system, bringing ancient Kautilyan realism to a unique height in the humanitarian and strategic context of the 21st century.

The policy of 'Bheda' or division described in Kautilya's 'Arthashastra' has emerged in 21st-century Indian diplomacy not just as a tool for creating one-sided rifts, but as a unique theoretical framework for maintaining 'Strategic Balancing' and 'Strategic Autonomy' in the complex context of contemporary geopolitics. Analyzing the foreign policy of the 'Modi Era' from 2014 to 2026, it is evident that India is no longer a follower of any specific block; instead, it is applying a modern and wise version of Kautilyan 'Bheda' policy through 'Multi-alignment' or multifaceted partnerships as described in Dr. S. Jaishankar's *The India Way* and his recent *Why Bharat Matters*. The core foundation of the philosophy of Kautilya, whom Roger Boesche called the 'first great political realist,' was to weaken the enemy's strength from within or isolate them from their allies; modern India is applying this exact strategy in the global power alignment where India, on one hand, ensures security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region through 'QUAD' with America, while on the other, maintains large defense contracts and commercial relations like the S-400 missile system with Russia. T.V. Paul, in his book *The Unfinished Quest*, has identified this position of India as 'Asymmetric Hedging,' which essentially increases India's capability as a 'Swing Power' and helps maintain strategic distance or 'Bheda' among various powers in its national interest without being bound to the exclusive sphere of any one major power. Judging by Kajari Kamal's *Strategic Cultural Roots* research, creating rifts among the allies of the enemy (Ari) or keeping them neutral was a primary state duty in Kautilya's Mandala theory; which modern India is implementing very successfully by creating alternative narratives like the 'India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor' (IMEC) or leadership of the 'Global South' against China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI). According to T.V. Paul's observations, India has succeeded in diplomatically isolating Pakistan on the issue of terrorism on the international stage by using the 'Bheda' policy in its path of 'Status Seeking'; particularly after the 2016 Uri and 2019 Pulwama incidents, the way India was able to keep Pakistan on the 'Grey List' for a long time by using international organizations like the 'Financial Action Task Force' (FATF), is a successful modern example of Kautilyan 'Bheda' policy where the adversary is crippled economically and diplomatically without direct war. Although it is important to mention that the situation has changed somewhat recently, especially after Donald Trump was sworn in as President for the second time. Additionally, in the theoretical framework of Harsh V. Pant and Shivshankar Menon, India's intelligence and cyber strategy have opened a new digital horizon of the 'Bheda' policy. Where Kautilya spoke of collecting information and spreading confusion through 'Gudha-purush' or spies, modern India is



creating a kind of 'invisible rift' by influencing the internal public opinion and policy-making processes of the adversary through the battle of information or 'Information Warfare' in cyberspace. Aparna Pande, in her book *From Chanakya to Modi*, has shown that India is increasing military and strategic relations with China's neighboring countries (such as Vietnam, Philippines, or Japan) as a modern form of 'Mandala Theory' to counter China's growing influence, which is essentially a strategic effort to create rifts in China's own sphere of influence. In the targets for 2024 to 2026, India's strategic diplomacy is becoming more complex and technology-dependent, where there are plans to use AI and Big Data analytics to identify the rifts in global geopolitics and use them in India's favor. As Shivshankar Menon mentioned in his book *Choices*, India's decision-making process is now much more information-driven and uncompromising on questions of national security. Even in Middle Eastern politics, India has successfully maintained balanced relations with both Israel and Arab countries by using the 'Bheda' policy, which has broken the earlier concept of 'Zero-sum' games. According to T.V. Paul, India wants to establish itself as a 'Bridging Power' that will maintain a kind of balance between East and West, and the primary weapon of this balance is 'Bheda'-meaning, without merging into any specific polarization, taking advantage of rifts or distances between various poles of the world to create a special position or 'Strategic Space' for itself. However, it is necessary to say that modern India's 'Bheda' policy is not an unprincipled division, but rather a well-planned realist strategy that has established India as a 'Leading Power' on the world stage, whose consent or dissent has currently become essential in determining the balance of global politics and which will be able to provide India with a unique 'Strategic Autonomy' in the world system by 2026.

Kautilya's principle of Danda (Force or Punishment) has emerged in 21st-century Indian diplomacy as an essential pillar of hard power and strategic resistance. In the 'Modi Era' (2014-2026), this reflects a transition from 'Strategic Hesitation' to a posture of 'Proactive Defense.' According to Dr. S. Jaishankar in *The India Way and Why Bharat Matters*, India has demonstrated its willingness to safeguard national interests beyond its borders, as evidenced by the 2016 surgical strikes and the 2019 Balakot air strikes. T.V. Paul, in *The Unfinished Quest*, identifies this military evolution as a critical component of India's 'Status Seeking,' where the demonstration of advanced capabilities positions India as an undisputed major power. This shift reached a new milestone with Operation Sindoor in May 2025, a calibrated tri-services response to cross-border terror infrastructure following the Pahalgam attack. As reported by the Press Information Bureau (PIB), this operation utilized indigenous precision-strike drones and networked warfare capabilities to dismantle nine major terror launchpads, redefining India's rules of engagement through "calculated force" and "strategic clarity." Simultaneously, the successful execution of Mission Divyastra in March 2024-the maiden flight test of the Agni-V missile equipped with Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicle (MIRV) technology-placed India among a



select group of nations capable of delivering multiple warheads with a single launch, significantly enhancing the credibility of its nuclear deterrent. The reinforcement of the nuclear triad was further solidified with the commissioning of INS Arighaat, India's second Arihant-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN), in August 2024. This vessel, boasting 70% indigenous content, provides the "unmatched deterrence" necessary to safeguard maritime interests in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Complementing these hardware upgrades, the 2025 launch of Mission Sudarshan Chakra aimed at neutralizing defense infiltrations through home-grown offensive technologies. These initiatives are underpinned by a surge in domestic defense production, which reached a record ₹1.51 lakh crore in FY 2024-25, alongside the induction of sophisticated indigenous platforms like the Tejas Mk-1A light combat aircraft, the Dhanush artillery guns, and the ATAGS (Advanced Towed Artillery Gun System). Shivshankar Menon and Harsh V. Pant argue that this shift towards 'Credible Deterrence' ensures that India's diplomatic efforts are backed by a formidable hard power presence, establishing the nation as a stabilizing force in an increasingly multipolar world.

Upayas in Modi's Foreign policy: A critical evaluation

The foreign policy of the Modi administration exhibits a profound continuity with Kautilyan realism, primarily through the elevation of "National Interest" or *Rashtra-hita* above abstract moralism. This alignment is rooted in the Kautilyan concept of *Yogakshema*-the acquisition of the unacquired and the preservation of the acquired-which finds its contemporary equivalent in Dr. S. Jaishankar's pursuit of "Strategic Autonomy" and "The India Way." Scholars like Roger Boesche and Kajari Kamal highlight that just as Kautilya urged the king to expand the state's influence, the current Indian establishment engages in what T.V. Paul describes as "Status Seeking" to augment India's global footprint. This "Neo-Kautilyan" approach is most visible in the "Neighborhood First" policy, a modern iteration of the *Mandala* theory where regional leadership is maintained through the combined application of *Sama* (cultural diplomacy) and *Dana* (Lines of Credit). By moving beyond long-standing "Strategic Hesitation," as noted by Aparna Pande, India has adopted a realist path where national security and economic prosperity are prioritized as the state's primary duties. Even the idealistic branding of "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*" serves a Kautilyan realist purpose: establishing India as an indispensable and influential global "*Vishwa-mitra*." Furthermore, the sophisticated blending of the four *Upayas*-*Sama*, *Dana*, *Bheda*, and *Danda* - reflects Harsh V. Pant's view of India practicing a modern version of the *Shadgunya* (six-fold) policy. This synthesis, often termed "Smart Power," represents an evolution of Kautilyan statecraft tailored for a multipolar world, ensuring that military strength and diplomatic persuasion operate in tandem to secure India's status as a leading power.



Conversely, significant structural and ethical dissimilarities exist between ancient Kautilyan thought and the modern Indian state, which is constrained by democratic values and a rules-based international order. Unlike the monarchical and centralized authority of Kautilya's "Swami," 21st-century India is a sovereign republic bound by a domestic constitution and international legal obligations. Shivshankar Menon emphasizes that Kautilya's era lacked the modern concepts of "Human Rights" or international organizations like the United Nations; consequently, while Kautilya's Danda was unrestrained, modern India's use of force must be justified under international law and Article 51 of the UN Charter. T.V. Paul argues that India's pursuit of global status often masks internal structural deficiencies in health and education, suggesting that Sama serves as a narrative to hide domestic weaknesses. Critiques of the Sama policy suggest its "symbolic" nature, as cultural exports like Yoga have not consistently translated into tangible strategic gains, and India's declining rank in global democratic indices undermines its "Mother of Democracy" narrative. In the realm of Dana, the "Big Brother" syndrome remains a persistent challenge, where financial aid is often perceived by neighbors like Nepal or Sri Lanka as intrusive, potentially driving them toward China's economic sphere. Furthermore, the "Multi-alignment" strategy associated with Bheda is frequently criticized as "strategic confusion," creating trust deficits among long-term partners during crises like the Ukraine war. Perhaps most critically, the application of Danda has failed to fundamentally alter the long-term strategic behaviors of China or Pakistan, with border tensions persisting despite nationalist rhetoric. Finally, the reliance on Western "Big Tech" for digital diplomacy poses a risk to "Strategic Autonomy," highlighting that modern Kautilyanism must navigate a landscape of global supply chains and economic interdependencies that often prevents a seamless balance between democratic ideals and ancient realist tactics.

Limitations of the Study

1. Focusing on 2014–2026 precludes detailed analysis of Kautilyan influence during the 1947–2014 era.
2. The vast scope of Arthashastra limits this study to the "Four Upayas," excluding broader concepts like Saptanga or Shadgunya.
3. National security constraints prevented access to classified documents; therefore, the research relies exclusively on published academic literature.
4. Aligning ancient monarchical, war-centric terminology with modern democratic frameworks and international human rights law presents inherent theoretical challenges.
5. Given the rapid, uncertain nature of contemporary global politics, geopolitical forecasts beyond 2026 remain subject to significant change.



Conclusion

This research has analyzed and demonstrated that India's foreign policy between 2014 and 2026 is not a sudden turn, but rather a historical return to Kautilyan philosophy deeply rooted in India's strategic culture. It has clearly emerged in the study that the 'Sama' policy has consolidated India's soft power through cultural and digital diplomacy, and the 'Dana' policy has established India as a 'First Responder' and a powerful voice for the Global South. On the other hand, the 'Bheda' policy has provided India with multi-alignment and strategic autonomy, while the 'Danda' policy has built a strong deterrence in protecting national security and territorial integrity. The foundation of the goal for India to become a 'Leading Power' by 2026 lies in this unique blend of ancient wisdom and modernity. In the words of T.V. Paul, India's 'Unfinished Quest' is now at the doorstep of a specific success. The dominance of the Navy in the Indian Ocean Region and growing capabilities in cyberspace prove that India is no longer a slow-moving 'elephant'; rather, it is now a swift and conscious force on the world stage. At last, Kautilya's Arthashastra is not just an ancient text, but the DNA of modern India's strategic thinking. Prioritizing national interest to the highest level while adhering to the limitations of international law proves that Kautilyan realism is eternal and timeless. This research concludes that Kautilya's 'Chaturvidha Upaya' remains the most effective strategic tool for maintaining India's excellence in the multifaceted and uncertain world of the 21st century. India's success is possible not through military force alone, but through a unique moral synthesis of ancient wisdom and modern democratic values.

References

- 1) Paul , T.V. , (2024) , The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi , Status Seeking and Major Power Aspirations , 120-155.
- 2) Jaishankar , Subrahmanyam , (2020) , The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World , The Strategic Culture of a Rising Power , 10-45.
- 3) Jaishankar , Subrahmanyam , (2024) , Why Bharat Matters , Civilizational State and Global Engagement , 180-220.
- 4) Pande , Aparna , (2017) , From Chanakya to Modi: The Evolution of India's Foreign Policy , Realism in the Indian Strategic Tradition , 25-60.
- 5) Kamal , Kajari , (2022) , Kautilya's Arthashastra: Strategic Cultural Roots of India's Contemporary Statecraft , Application of the Four Upayas in Modern Diplomacy , 90-125.
- 6) Boesche , Roger , (2002) , The First Great Political Realist: Kautilya and His Arthashastra , Kautilyan Realism and Foreign Policy , 35-70.



- 7) Menon , Shivshankar , (2016) , Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy , Strategic Autonomy and National Security Decisions , 110-145.
- 8) Pant , Harsh V. , (2016) , Indian Foreign Policy: An Overview , Multipolarity and India's Strategic Balancing , 150-185.
- 9) Malone , David M. , (2011) , Does the Elephant Dance? Contemporary Indian Foreign Policy , India's Emerging Role in the World Order , 240-275.
- 10) Bisht , Medha , (2019) , Kautilya's Arthashastra: Philosophy of Strategy , Theoretical Framework of Kautilyan Diplomacy , 115-150.
- 11) Rangarajan , L.N. , (1992) , Kautilya: The Arthashastra , Analysis and Translation of Diplomatic Upayas , 535-570.

Contact Author Email: sukhenbaidya8981@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54121/2021111468>