

Comparison of Select Maxims and Sutras: Sun Tzu's *Art of War*¹ and Kautilya's *Arthashastra*²

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Abstract

The comparison of literatures of the two ancient texts on strategy and warfare, Sun Tzu's Art of War (China) and Kautilya's Arthashastra (India), is a challenging and worthwhile exercise. This article attempts the interpretation and comparison of select maxims or aphorisms of Sun Tzu's Art of War where it matches with a sutra (a statement or a set of rules) in Kautilya's Arthashastra. The maxims are condensed and coded aphorisms and their enduring essence is clearly applicable today. The article has selected maxims from Sun Tzu's Art of War's Chapters 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 13 to include aspects of military factors in appreciations and tactics, humane treatment of prisoners, issues of stratagems, civil-military relations, morale, calamities to avoid, and intelligence.

Introduction

According to the Chinese academic Professor Yan Xuetong: 'Indian scholars view both Sun Tzu and Kautilya as strategists and have done many comparative studies about their thoughts on strategies'.³ Surely, the comparison of literatures of the two ancient texts on strategy and warfare, that is Sun Tzu's *Art of War* (China) and Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (KA) (India), is a challenging and

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worthwhile exercise. As the saying goes that 'The devil is in details', this article attempts the interpretation and comparison of select maxims or aphorisms of Sun Tzu's *Art of War* where it matches with *sutras* (a statement or a set of rules) in KA. The maxims are condensed and coded aphorisms and are clearly applicable today, as their essence endures. The article has selected maxims from Sun Tzu's *Art of War*'s Chapters 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 10, and 11.

***Art of War* Chapter 1: Laying Plans**

***Art of War* 1.3-11.** 'The art of war... is governed by five constant factors...Moral Law (which causes the people to be in complete accord with their ruler, so that they will follow him regardless of their lives, undismayed by any danger); Heaven (night and day, cold and heat, times and seasons); Earth (distances, great and small, danger and security, open ground and narrow passes, the chances of life and death); The Commander (who stands for the virtue of wisdom, sincerely, benevolence, courage, and strictness); Method and Discipline (military organisation, logistics, troop control, and control of military expenditure)'.

'The Moral Law causes the people to be in complete accord with their ruler, so that they will follow him regardless of their lives, undismayed by any danger'.

'Heaven signifies night and day, cold and heat, times and seasons'.

'Earth comprises distances, great and small; danger and security; open ground and narrow passes; the chances of life and death'.

'The Commander stands for the virtues of wisdom, sincerely, benevolence, courage, and strictness'.

'By method and discipline are to be understood the marshalling of the army in its proper subdivisions, the graduation of ranks among the officers, the maintenance of roads by which supplies may reach the army, and the control of military expenditure'.

'These five heads should be familiar to every general: he who knows them will be victorious; he who knows them not, will fail'.

For KA, in comparison to Sun Tzu's *Art of War*'s factors on moral law, is the fundamental aspect of *dharma* or ethics and legitimacy. This is implicit in KA. Heaven and Earth of *Art of War* can be compared with KA, which has the three factors to be kept in mind, that is *Desh* (Terrain), *Kaal* (Time), and *Shakti* (Power). For the commander, KA *sutra* 6.2.33 has given the need for an individual to possess *utsah-shakti*, i.e., '... The power of valour is power of energy'.

KA has a section on the activity of the commandant of the army in Book 2, which is quite similar to what Sun Tzu prescribes. KA *sutra* 2.33.9-10 describes it:

2.33.9. The Commandant of the Army, trained in the sciences of all (kinds of) fights and weapons, (and) renowned for riding on elephants, horses or in chariots, should be conversant with the same, (and) with the direction of the work carried out by the four-fold troops.

2.33.10. He should look out for suitable ground for one's side (suitable season for fighting), arraying a force against (enemy arrays), breaking unbroken ranks, reforming broken ranks, breaking compact ranks, destroying broken ranks, destroying the fort, and the season for an expedition.

Art of War Chapter 2: Waging War

Art of War 2.17. '...The captured soldiers should be kindly treated and kept'.

For KA, *sutra* 13.4.52 is comparable with *Art of War 2.17*:

When attacking the enemy's fort or camp, they should grant safety to those fallen down, those turning their back, those surrendering, those who's with loose hair (as a mark of submission), those without weapons, those disfigured by terror, and those not fighting.

Art of War Chapter 3: Attack by Stratagem

Art of War 3.2. 'Hence to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence, supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting'.

Art of War 3.3. 'Thus, the highest form of generalship is to balk the enemy's plans; the next best is to prevent the junction of the enemy's forces; the next in order is to attack the enemy's army in the field; and the worst policy of all is to besiege walled cities'.

KA also gives top priority to *Mantra-shakti* (power of counsel and diplomacy) to gain victory without a fight. On generalship, Kautilya likewise presses for a similar proactive argument based on intellect and his famous *sutras* at the conclusion of his Book 7 on The Six Measures of Foreign Policy (7.18.43-44):

7.18.43. He, who is well-versed in the science of politics, should employ all the means, viz., advancement, decline, and stable conditions, as well weakening and extermination.

7.18.44. He who sees the six measures of policy as being interdependent in this manner, plays, as he pleases, with kings tied by the chains of his intellect.

Art of War 3.9. 'If equally matched, we can offer battle, if slightly inferior in number, we can avoid the enemy, if quite unequal in every way, we can flee from him'.

However, in KA, 'Fleeing' when attacked by strong king is not found, but instead taking shelter with another king is the norm in Book 12, Concerning a Weaker King, in *sutras* 12.1.7-9:

12.1.7. One submissive everywhere lives despairing of life like a ram (strayed) from the herd.

12.1.8. And one fighting with only a small army perishes like one plunging in the ocean without a boat.

12.1.9. He should, however, act finding shelter with a king superior to him or in an unassailable fort.

Interestingly on fleeing, Kautilya's *Niti Darpana*, 3.19 counsels:

'From fearful famines and epidemics,
from attacks by the enemy,
and from contacts with the wicked,
to stay alive, one has to flee'.⁴

Kanad Sinha in *From Dasarajna to Kuruksetra: Making of a Historical Tradition* (2021)⁵ has an episode about the strategy of fleeing in combat by Krishna. In the first encounter, the combined forces of Krishna and Balram defeated Jarasamdha in Mathura region. But in further encounters, due to superiority of the foe, they flee to Dwarka. In Bhasa's play, Duryodhana mocks Krishna: 'Where was your bravery when you fled terrified from the king of Magadha (Jarasamdha) who was enraged at his son-in-law's (Kamsa) murder?' Krishna replies: 'Suyodhana, the wise man's bravery accords with the time, the place, and the situation'.⁶ Sinha then refers to *The Harivamsa* to give the logic of being practical: 'Krishna felt no shame in flying away from his enemy and declared that a wise person does not stay near a stronger foe. One must fight when capable and go away if not'.⁷ Not surprisingly, Krishna is also called *Ranchor* (one who abandons the battlefield).

- **Civil-Military Relations.** *Art of War* 3.17.5 has one of the most relevant aphorisms on civil-military relations as we understand today: 'He will win who has military capacity and is not interfered with by the sovereign'. This is analysed in Chapter 8 below.
- **On Intelligence.** Further, Sun Tzu in the last advice sums up at 3.18: 'Hence, the saying: If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained, you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle'.

In *Art of War* Chapter 10: Terrain, there is a similar aphorism. Sun Tzu at 10.31 says, '...If you know the enemy and know yourself, your victory will not stand in doubt; if you know Heaven and know Earth, you may make your victory complete'.

For Kautilya, the seven *prakrits* or the constituent elements of a state (all states including own) in the Mandala system needs to be known thoroughly through means of intelligence and with proper analysis. KA, in fact, is a manual of intelligence studies and thus, unlike *Art of War*, it does not find it necessary to lecture but rather provides a methodology of intelligence analysis.

***Art of War* Chapter 7: Manoeuvring**

Art of War 7.36. 'When you surround an army, leave an outlet free. Do not press a desperate foe too hard'.

KA 10.3.57. 'The vehemence of one returning again to fight and despairing of his life becomes irresistible; therefore, he should not harass a broken enemy'.

***Art of War* Chapter 8: Variations in Tactics**

Art of War 8.3. 'There are roads which must not be followed, armies which not be attacked, town which must not be besieged, positions which must not be contested, and commands of the sovereign which must not be obeyed'.

Art of War's last counsel 'Commands of the sovereign which must not be obeyed' is worth an analysis when read with *Art of War* Chapter 3: Attack by Stratagem at 3.17.5, which states, 'He will win who has military capacity and is not interfered with by the sovereign'.

While no example is quoted, Sun Tzu is raising a fundamental issue of civil-military relations at the strategic level on the civil control of the military, including operational and tactical matters in the military chain of command. Although KA does not include this aphorism (as the king himself participated in combat), some contemporary examples are of interest.

'Nelson's Eye' is a good example from Western maritime history.⁸ In the case of India, at the operational level, some historical examples in public domain are:

- In 1971 liberation of Bangladesh, Lieutenant General (Lt Gen) Sagat Singh as IV Corps Commander was told not to cross Meghna River by the Army Commander Lt Gen Jagjit Singh Aurora. Singh is known to have disregarded the instruction as he was convinced that he could reach Dhaka for a decisive victory when he viewed the terrain across Meghna River: only if his troops could cross the Meghna. He did it by improvised heliborne operations. In a YouTube podcast discussion, Lt Gen Raj Shukla narrated Singh's exploitive dash to Dacca—the decisive moment and was instrumental in the surrender.⁹ Another example of Singh uncanny propensity to seize an opportunity bypassing the

hierarchy in view of a ripe opportunity is in the biography *Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw* by Lt Gen Depinder Singh and also in Shukla's podcast. In 1967, Singh was the General Officer Commanding (GOC) of the division at Nathula, facing the Chinese. Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw was the-then officiating Chief Of Army Staff. At Nathula in Sep 1967, Singh retaliated with massive artillery. This was a first-of-its-kind successful encounter by India post the 1962 Sino-Indian war. Evidently, Singh on his own initiative took the action without taking permission from the higher echelons of command. When the-then Indian Prime Minister (PM) Indira Gandhi queried, Manekshaw is known to have remarked: 'I am afraid they are enacting Hamlet without the Prince'.¹⁰ Shukla, in the YouTube podcast, stressed on this innovative Shakespearean example. Manekshaw then explained the matter in detail to the PM and got it closed. This was the synergy, or we can say 'Chemistry', 'When Singh followed Sun Tzu and Manekshaw as the chief thought that he had done the right thing and never admonished him.

- Context does matter. In Dec 2001, Indian military mobilised in Operation Parakram in response to a Pakistan-sponsored terror attack on the Indian Parliament. Both nuclear-armed countries came very close to a war. In Jan 2002, a strike corps commander was removed from command as he nearly crossed the staging area and was, so it is said, to launch the strike corps as he found the ripe opportunity.
- In the Military Heritage Festival in Oct 2023, in session 6 titled 'Limited Conflict'¹¹, Lt Gen Ramesh Kulkarni, author of *Siachen 1987*, narrated his experience as GOC 28 Infantry Division, responsible for Siachen Glacier in 1987/1988. No flights were permitted by the government over enemy territory. But Kulkarni was keen to have some intelligence of enemy disposition and build up across the glacier. He requested Air Marshal MM Singh, Commandant Western Air Command, for assistance. Sure enough, an aerial photo was delivered, implying in the discussion that Singh ignored the order not to cross enemy air space.¹²
- In session 17 titled 'War Stories' in the Military Heritage Festival in Oct 2023¹³, Major General Ian Cardoza narrated his experience as GOC of 10 Infantry Division at Chamb in

a no-war-no-peace setting. Use of Re-coilless guns (RCL) was not permitted. However, when he was on a helicopter reconnaissance, RCL engaged and neutralised the Pakistani post which was trying to shoot down the helicopter.

- On the doctrine of command responsibility, legal scholar Wing Commander UC Jha in the United Service Institution Occasional Paper *Military Manual on Laws of War* argues that 'The Indian Army Act 1950 states that a subordinate is not bound to obey illegal orders of his superiors. However, the doctrine of superior responsibility is missing in the Indian military legal system'. He refers to only one provision in Army Act, 1950. Section 64(a) of the Act provides imprisonment of up to seven years in case a person being-in-command receives a complaint and does not report the case to proper authority.¹⁴

Lest Sun Tzu is misinterpreted as a disobedient general, Gerard Chaliand in his seminal work *The Art of War in World History* (1994) gives a good explanation in the introductory essay:

Sun Tzu adds that there should be no fear of disobeying the ruler's orders if the situation on ground so requires. With such a bold assertion, especially at a time when despotism was the rule, Sun Tzu was not questioning the political dimensions of the conflict ('Good rulers deliberate a plan, good generals execute them'), but the rigid directions of the rulers lacking the means to assess a concrete situation.¹⁵

***Art of War* Chapter 10: Terrain**

***Art of War* 10.14.** 'Now an army is exposed to six severe calamities, not arising from natural causes, but from faults for which the general is responsible. These are: Flight; Insubordination; Collapse; Ruin; Disorganisation; and Rout'.

KA Book 8 is solely on disasters and how to avoid them. KA classifies disasters as *manusham* (man-made) and caused due to *devam* (God-sent/beyond human control).

Two Types of Disasters. Book 8 of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is about *vyasanas* (disasters) of two types—*manusham* and *devam*:

8.1.2. 'A calamity of a constituent, of a divine or human origin, springs from ill luck or wrong policy'.

8.4.1. 'Visitation from the gods are: Fire, Floods, Disease, Famine, and Epidemic'.

Note that above *sutras* are very clear about link of disasters with policy failure (wrong policy). The calamities of the army are in Chapter 5, Section 133, which contains *sutras* 1 to 21 covering 'The Group of Calamities of the Army'. The essence of the calamities corresponds much more to those limited five, spelt out by Sun Tzu. In contrast, KA *Sutra* 8.5.1 is more elaborate and details 33 types of calamities:

8.5.1. The calamities of the army are: (the state of being) unhonoured, dishonoured, unpaid, sick, newly arrived, came after a long march, exhausted, depleted, repulsed, broken in the first onslaught, caught in an unsuitable season, caught in an unsuitable terrain, despondent of hope, deserted, with women-folk inside, with 'Darts' inside, with a rebellious base, split inside, ran away, widely scattered, encamped near, completely absorbed, blocked, encircled, with supplies of grains and men cut off, dispersed in one's own land, dispersed in an ally's land, infested by treasonable men, with a hostile enemy in the rear, with its base denuded (of troops), not united with the master, with head broken, and blind.

Most of the calamities, barring being unhonoured and dishonoured, are operational matters of combat. However, the next *sutra* is an indication of how to treat the military. In issues of morale, *Sutra* 8.5.2 is the crux:

'Among these, as between an unhonoured and dishonoured (army), the unhonoured would fight when honoured with money, not the dishonoured, with resentment in its heart'.

As a precaution not to follow the disastrous situation in *sutra* 8.5.2, KA in *sutra* 8.5.21 suggest sensibly:

'The (king), ever diligent, should take steps right beforehand against that cause because of which he might suffer a calamity of the constituents'.

Art of War Chapter 11: The Nine Situations

Art of War 11.26. 'Prohibit the taking of omens and do away with superstitious doubts. Then, until death itself comes, no calamity need be feared'.

In KA, excellence of enemy is at 6.1.13, which relies on fate:

'...Trusting in fate... for an enemy of this type becomes easy to exterminate'.

Further in Book 9 (Activity of the King About to March), at 9.4.26, Kautilya reinforces his warning not to be superstitious:

'The object slips away from the foolish person, who continuously consults the stars; for an object is the (auspicious) constellation for (achieving) and object; what will the stars do?'

***Art of War* Chapter 13: The Use of Spies**

***Art of War* 13.27.** 'Hence it is only the enlightened ruler and the wise general who will use the highest intelligence of the army for purposes of spying and great results. Spies are the most important element in war, because on them depends an army's ability to move'.

KA is a manual on intelligence studies at the macro as well as micro level. It spells out the methodology and its application. Thus, it will be unfair to compare Kautilya's tome with Sun Tzu's terse aphorism.

Conclusion

Although both the ancient texts were coded in different cultures and civilisations, some common wisdom can be found in both, as indicated above. This is termed as co-variance. The common wisdom in the maxims and *sutras* of the two classics is enduring and relevant for contemporary times. Much more of this kind of comparison is needed to enrich the literature of the art of warfare and strategy.

Endnotes

¹ All references are from Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, (HarperCollins, London, 2011).

² All references are from R.P. Kangle, *The Kautiliya Arthashastra, Part 2: An English Translation with Critical and Explanatory Notes*, (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, Second Edition, 2010).

³ Yan Xuetong 'How Do Xunzi and Kautilya Ponder Interstate Politics' in, Amitav Acharya, Daniel A Bell, Rajeev Bhargava and Yan Xuetong (Eds.), *Bridging Two Worlds: Comparing Classical Political Thought and Statecraft*

in *India and China*, (University of California Press, California, 2023), p.77. For comparative study see Chapter 5 'Contemporary Use of Traditional Historical Knowledge in China and India: A Literature Survey' in Pradeep Kumar Gautam, *Kautilya's Arthashastra: Contemporary Issues and Comparison*, IDSA Monograph Series No.47, Oct 2015.

⁴ A.N.D. Haksar, *Chanakya Niti: Verses on Life and Living*, (Penguin Books, Gurugram 2020), p.24.

⁵ Kanad Sinha, *From Dasarajna to Kuruksetra: Making of a Historical Tradition*, (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2021), p.285.

⁶ Bhasa, *The Shattered Thigh and Other Plays*, tr. A.N.D. Haksar, (Penguin, New Delhi, 2008), p. 69.

⁷ Kanad Sinha, op cit, p.285.

⁸ The expression "Nelson's Eye" is derived from the exploits of Horatio Nelson (1758-1805) of the British Navy who had lost an arm and right eye in battle. In an attack on Danish ships off Copenhagen, Nelson was the second-in-command. The British found it difficult to fight the enemy. Nelson, when signaled to stop, placed the telescope to his blind eye and said that he could not "see" the signal and continued the battle which he won.

⁹ 027 - Sam Manekshaw and Sagat Singh, Gen Raj Shukla, *DOAP Podcast*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mwx7DEeGfEU> (accessed Aug 2024)

¹⁰ Lt Gen Depinder Singh, *Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw: Soldiering with Dignity*, (Natraj Publishers, Dehradun, 2002), p.14.

¹¹ MIL-FEST Session 6: Limited Conflicts, Indian Military Festival 2023 organised by the *United Service Institution of India*,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Joc3d3oYXps&list=PLkAXeZEGOaj3BWswl2o1ytpay4ZSEuiYz&index=7> (accessed Aug 2024).

¹² Lt Gen Ramesh Kulkarni and Anjali Karpe, *Siachen 1987: Battle for the Frozen Frontier*, (, HarperCollins, Gurugram ,2022), pp.102-108.

¹³ MIL-FEST Session 17: War Stories, Indian Military Festival 2023 organised by the *United Service Institution of India*,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwTI_EZ1aXc&list=PLkAXeZEGOaj3BWswl2o1ytpay4ZSEuiYz&index=19 (accessed Aug 2024).

¹⁴ Wing Commander UC Jha, *Military Manual on Laws of War*, USI Occasional Paper No.3, 2022, p.8 and note 18.

¹⁵ Gerard Chaliand, 'Warfare and Strategic Culture in History' in *The Art of War in World History*, (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press,1994), pp.17-18.