

# Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and its Relevance to Contemporary Strategic Studies

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## Introduction

The normative setting of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is the political unification of common cultural Indian subcontinent. Within this, the *Arthashastra* has a twofold aim. First, it seeks to show how the ruler should protect his territory. Second, is how territory should be acquired. The end or primary goal in the *Arthashastra* is *Yogakshema* – protection, security and stability of the State. Today, political unification of common cultural Indian subcontinent as in the text is no more applicable as India is a sovereign nation-state less parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh. However, many theoretical concepts and ideas in the text can be applied in internal and external matters related to strategic studies and also contribute to strengthen the Global International Studies from enduring Indian traditions. The concepts that need to be realised, are not only for waging war/application of force, but can also be used in strategic vocabulary in all disciplines of social science including peace research - a task yet to be undertaken by contemporary scholars.

In recent times, there has been a steady growth in literature on the defence, security, and international related aspects of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*.<sup>1</sup> This trend has now made it possible to go beyond the primary stage of just introduction to the various basic concepts and vocabulary in the text. The topic of Comprehensive National Power also has been analysed by many scholars satisfactorily.<sup>2</sup> As the study, debate and scholarship on revisiting and reinterpreting Indian heritage gains momentum, other levels of analysis emerge, which now need to be examined. In this regard, strategic thinking and 'how to think' assumes importance and this paper attempts to introduce this aspect related to contemporary strategic studies. It explains issues and concepts on learning, the intellectual part of strategic thinking, warcraft and

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hybrid warfare, and understanding strategy and how it resides in the dynamic *Mandala* theory.

### **Learning, Training and Education**

Kautilya begins by explaining the necessary conditions which must be met in learning and education. The student must also have a desire for learning or spirit of inquiry. Four subjects to be studied in progression are : (a) *Anvikshiki*, (b) the three Vedas (theology), *trayi*, (c) economics, production, manufacture (*vartha*) and (d) science of politics, *danda-niti*. While today there seems to be clear understanding of the second, third and fourth sub- disciplines, not much enquiry has taken place on the first or the 'preamble' or the 'mother of intellectual training' called *Anvikshiki*.

*Anvikshiki* or 'the Science of Enquiry' is based on the Indian schools of philosophy of *Samkhya*, *Yoga* and *Lokayata*. The third sub-discipline listed by Kautilya is *Lokayata* which is heterodox, that is, it is not purely based on the Vedas and is materialistic. It is also called *Charvaka*. This demonstrates that in prescribing the syllabus, Kautilya was not influenced by any ideology of the moment. He was thoroughly liberal and unbiased and did not reject any knowledge tradition that was then extant. Today, any good teacher in his reading list to his students cannot be selective, and so was Kautilya. This is a continuity of Indian tradition. *Anvikshiki* is similar to what we now term 'how to think' or 'theory of reason' (*hetu- shastra/hetu - vidya*). It is important to remember that *Anvikshiki* got bifurcated and was treated as two subjects, viz. the soul and the theory of reason. Kautilya focused only on *hetu*, or theory of reason, and did not incorporate the soul or *Atma- vidya*, which is now part of Indian philosophy called *Darshan*.<sup>3</sup>

Kautilya is very clear on the need for philosophy (*Anvikshiki*) and explains that (philosophy) confers benefit on the people, keeps the mind steady in adversity and in prosperity and brings about proficiency in thought, speech and action. Philosophy is ever thought as the lamp of all sciences, as the means of all actions (and) as the support of all laws (and duties).<sup>4</sup>

### **Intellectual Aspects of Strategic Thinking**

Kautilya's main argument is that the leaders must be steeped in the above four disciplines and only then can they be successful leaders, managers and commanders. A study of the text reveals

that there are latent meanings which guide how to think and carry out appreciations including intelligence appreciations. These are also grounded in Indian philosophy and ethics. Some of the important ones can now be summarised briefly as under :-

(a) **Self-Development and Self Discipline.** Kautilya's *Arthashastra* gives guidance on morals, including the most fundamental and enduring aspect of morals in human affairs, that is, abstaining from injury, non-violence or *Ahimsa* and control over senses.<sup>5</sup> The text says:-

(i) Duties common to all are: abstaining from injury (to living creatures), truthfulness, uprightness, freedom from malice, compassionateness and forbearance.<sup>6</sup>

(ii) Control over the senses, which is motivated by training in the sciences, should be secured by giving up lust, anger, greed, pride, arrogance and fool-hardiness. Absence of improper indulgence in (the pleasure of) sound, touch, colour, taste and smell by the senses of hearing, touch and sight, the tongue and sense of smell, means of control over senses; or, the practice of (this) science (gives such control). For, the whole of this science means control over senses.<sup>7</sup>

The above help in preparing the leader to weigh up right from wrong and have the capacity to do clear thinking not encumbered by fatigue, hubris, and anger. It is clear that one has to be in command over oneself with self-control and self-discipline before one can think of commanding and controlling troops and engage with the enemy in dialectical mind game. Notions of victory or defeat, it is common military knowledge, lies in the mind of the commander. Thus, the three sub-disciplines of *Anvikshiki* helps the leader to acquire and understand the dual (*Samkhya* and *Yoga*), and materialistic (*Lokayata* or *Charvaka*) aspects of reality.

(b) **Intellectual Honesty Derived from Scientific Thinking.** Kautilya seems aware of the desire of the governments to expect intelligence to support their policies and the intelligence to be supportive. He, thus, ensures that only objective intelligence is provided and nothing subjective or a-priori

intelligence gets generated and only 'scientific' methods are employed.<sup>8</sup> Today, this central argument of intellectual honesty assumes great importance. Theoretically, this is not new. Field Marshal FM Slim who defeated the Japanese Army in India's Eastern Front during the Second World War had likewise argued to give due importance to the moral courage and its spiritual and intellectual aspects.

(c) **Power (*Shakti*) the Currency of Statecraft in Three Categories and Priorities.** Kautilya defines and prioritises power and insists that all three must exist but ideally they need to be in the following priority :-

- (i) **Priority 1 - *Mantra-shakti* or *Mantri-shakti*** (power of counsel and diplomacy). Kautilya is cognizant that war is not the top priority and is the last resort and thus has this dictum as the top priority.
- (ii) **Priority 2 - *Prabhav-shakti*** (power of treasury and army). This is clearly what we understand today as economic might and military capacity.
- (iii) **Priority 3 - *Uttisah-skakti*** (power of personal energy). This is what may be now given in any leadership and management manual.

(d) **Perception and Knowledge.** Kautilya divides perception into three categories – directly perceived or immediate knowledge, unperceived or mediated, indirect knowledge as reported by human intelligence, experts etc., and inferred.<sup>9</sup> 'This statement about the three variants of knowledge in statecraft in the *Arthashastra* is the most significant with respect to the methodology of intelligence analysis, assessment and estimates as well as strategic planning.'<sup>10</sup> Kautilya further recommends that any information must be deliberated by a group and must not be left to one individual who may be biased towards intuitive knowledge and hunches. In other words, the need for collective deliberation.<sup>11</sup> These time tested concepts or should we say maxims are applicable today as they were in the past, and are considered to be the most important tool for strategic thinking.

(e) **Learning from the Others.** Liberal education and wide ranging inquiring mind is a perquisite. It needs to be

appreciated that since ancient Indian traditions, much can be learnt from an adversary or any other culture or civilisation. In this regard, Indian philosophy as expounded by Kautilya, has this important idea embedded :-

*“Learning from the enemy or the asuras (demons) is an interesting ancient concept. The preceptor of the asuras is Sukra and that of devas, Brahspati. Kautilya’s Arthashastra begins with a mangala: ‘Om, Salutation to Sukra and Brahspati.’ In combat, the best teacher is the enemy. Likely adversaries and belligerents also interact in a way of structuration. In other words, it is not only the Chinese who may read Sun Tzu but so could others. One does not have to be a German to understand what Clausewitz wrote about the fog, friction and role of chance in war.”<sup>12</sup>*

### **Warcraft**

Unlike in the Sinic traditions of *Seven Military Classics* which include Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*, there is : ‘Hardly any literature dealing exclusively with military science or the art of war during ancient and medieval periods. But it has to be remembered that warcraft was then regarded as of statecraft and so the various works on statecraft deal also with the art of war.’<sup>13</sup>

Covert wars are seldom declared and continue to be part of statecraft in terms such as hybrid warfare, generations of warfare (4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> generation etc.), asymmetrical warfare, proxy war and so on. What is important to note is that unlike in the case of these modern terminologies which are rooted in historical narratives, Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* does not refer to any historical episodes or it is a-historical. It deals with concepts and a vocabulary. There seems to be continuity in the ancient with the modern.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, interestingly the context of what Kautilya wrote for his times now assumes importance as the very character of war has changed to war amongst the people and emergence of non-state actors and so on, and cyber wars. Surely war-craft, statecraft and diplomacy are now conjoined as was in the time of Kautilya in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. Yet, as India has ongoing territorial disputes it may be dangerous to assume that capture or defence of territory will not be expected. We need to understand that this

is an ongoing issue of janapada/*rastra* or territorial integrity and sovereignty.

### **Hybrid Warfare or Matching Old with the New**

Today the international buzz words are hybrid war, new generation war, war amongst the people etc., where there is an overlap of military and non- military means. According to General Gerasimov of Russia, 'non-military measures are occurring at a ratio of 4:1 over military operations'.<sup>14</sup> It is very interesting to see that a similar concept exists in the *Artha* text which has an origin thousands of years ago.

In a recent research, Kautilya's core concepts about war are analysed to be a mixture of warfare and diplomacy. The foreign policy operations discussed seem not to refer to a classical war. Rather it appears that Kautilya has a combination of diplomatic pressure, political subversion, covert operations and military threats in mind. Such an approach for achieving foreign policy objectives is clearly favoured by Kautilya. Key for the successful conduct of foreign policy are (a) adequate intelligence on the adversary state, (b) rapid information about the execution of one's own operations and (c) collective deliberation and the ruler's decision-making based upon (a) and (b).<sup>15</sup>

In the above, three principles stand out. The first and central is intelligence. It is not only its collection but analyses in an era of 'humungous' overload of data. The second is akin to the well know OODA (Observe, Orient, Decide and Act) loop – theorised by a fighter pilot in the Korean War in the 1950s. The third, there is a need for a feedback and collective deliberation. Kautilya likewise presses for a similar proactive argument and his famous *sutras* at the conclusion of his Book VIII on The Six Measures of Foreign Policy as : '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. 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.' <sup>16</sup>

### **Understanding Strategy and Mandala Theory**

James L Cook defines strategy, like that in Kautilya's aphorism or *sutras* : 'strategy is designed to link *ends* (national interests), *ways*

(concepts that describe how something might be done) and *means* (resources that are employed as capabilities)'.<sup>17</sup> Lukas Milevski argues that the primary source of character of war is strategy and strategy's two main relationships are that between military power and political consequences, and between interacting adversaries.<sup>18</sup> Lawrence Freedman in his book *Strategy* (2013) argues that strategy remains the best word for expressing our attempts to think about actions in advance, in the light of our goals and our capacities. What these authors are explaining is interestingly embedded in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*.

In the Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, the entire process of a strategic and intelligence appreciation has been made into discreet and logical parts in a 'scientific' manner to be thought through. This is a comprehensive *Mandala* theory. In the ultimate analysis, the end state in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is *Yogakshema*. Historically most disaster happen when final aim is not clear and states get sucked or dragged into enduring conflicts. Kautilya advises that this needs to be avoided. In the circle of competing states which Kautilya constructs as a *Mandala*, there is the need to know, establish and measure one's own capability and also that of the adversary or adversaries including what is the state of 'power' or *Shakti*. This capability is the measure of the constituent elements of a state – seven in number, also called *Saptanga* (seven limbs) or the seven *Prakrits* or constituent elements of a state : (a) *Svamin* (king or ruler), (b) *Amatya* (body of ministers and structure of administration), (c) *Janapada/Rastra* (territory being agriculturally fertile with mines, forest and pastures, water resources and communication system for trade and people), (d) *Durga/Pura* (fort), (e) *Kosha* (treasury), (f) *Danda/Bala* (army), and (g) *Mitra* (ally).

We can relate this to Chapter 3 (Attack by Stratagem) of Sun Tzu's *Art of War* which is about intelligence and knowledge. In its first sentence it counsels, '*Hence the saying: If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.*'<sup>19</sup> In contemporary intelligence studies, this is a function of professionalism in having the capacity and capability of gaining proper knowledge and assessment by way of academic rigour, regional and cultural studies, diplomatic means, open source literature and a combination of intelligence of various types like diplomatic, military, and technical.

All the above intellectual aspects have to be practiced. What policy or ways and means that are to be applied are given in the four *Upayas* or methods that is : *sama-dana- bheda-danda* or conciliation, gifts, rupture and force. These have to be integrated with the six measures of foreign policy called *Sadgunya* which are (a) *Samdhi*, making a treaty containing conditions or terms, that is, the policy of peace, (b) *Vigraha*, the policy of hostility, (c) *Asana*, the policy of remaining quiet (and not planning to march on an expedition), (d) *Yana*, marching on an expedition, (e) *Samsraya*, seeking shelter with another king or in a fort, and (f) *Dvaidhibhava*, the double policy of *Samdhi* with one king and *Vigraha* with another at the same time. In sum, one of the six measures or its variation combined with the application of any of the four *upâyas* has to be thought through; issues of morality, justice, and legitimacy (*dharma*) have to be catered for as well. The text tells us repeatedly that, serious issues of war and peace and application of force or *danda* has to be legitimate and in contemporary understanding, it cannot be outsourced to artificial intelligence and robots. In short, the text has guidelines on strategic thinking on how to think, what to know or measure and what to do.

### Conclusion

This article has summarised some enduring aspects of strategic studies from Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. It is a good manual for leadership development, education and training. Foremost is its rich repertoire of the 'science of enquiry' or how to think. It shows that intellectual honesty is derived from scientific thinking. Its focus on warcraft is relevant today seeing the blurring changes in the character of war where both use of military force with diplomacy overlap. Its most unique contribution is the concept of a *Mandala* Theory which needs to be dynamically applied to issues of politics, diplomacy, statecraft, and even business and management. This theory is not just only 'India-centric' but has universal application.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Available at <http://www.idsa.in/history/publications>. Accessed on 28 May 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Malay Mishra, 'Unique Approach to Comprehensive Power through the Lens of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*', *Journal of the USI of India*, Vol. CXLVII, No. 607, January- March 2017, pp. 60-73.

<sup>3</sup> Satis Chandra Vidyabhusana, *A History of Indian Logic : Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, (first published in 1920), 1971, reprint 2010, pp.5-7.

<sup>4</sup> RP Kangle, *The Kautiliya Arthasastra, Part II: Translation with Critical and Explanatory Notes*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, Second Edition, Bombay University, 1972, 7<sup>th</sup> Reprint, 2010, as extracted from Sutra 1.3.11-12, pp. 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, (Sutra 1.3.13 and 1.6.1-3), p.8, p.12.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.12.

<sup>8</sup> Dany Shoham and Michael Liebig, '*The intelligence dimensions of Kautilyan statecraft and its implication for the present*', *Journal of Intelligence History*, 2016, p.13, p.15.

<sup>9</sup> RP Kangle, op cit, 1.9. 4-8, p.17.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Liebig, '*Statecraft and Intelligence Analysis in Kautilya's Arthasastra*', in Pradeep Kumar Gautam, Saurabh Mishra and Arvind Gupta (eds.), *Indigenous Historical Knowledge : Kautilya and His Vocabulary (Volume III)*, New Delhi, IDSA/Pentagon Press, 2016, p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Pradeep Kumar Gautam, *Understanding Dharma and Artha in Statecraft through Kautilya's Arthshastra*, IDSA Monograph Series No.53, July 2016, pp.96-97.

<sup>13</sup> Jagadish Narayan Sarkar, *The Art of War in Medieval India*, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1984, p.1,4.

<sup>14</sup> Timoty Thomas, '*Russia's Military Strategy and Ukraine: Indirect, Asymmetric and Putin-led*', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol.28, No.3, July- September 2015, p. 455.

<sup>15</sup> Subrata K.Mitra and Michael Liebig, *Kautilya's Arthshastra – An Intellectual Portrayal*, NOMOS, Baden- Baden, 2016, p.84.

<sup>16</sup> RP Kangle, op cit, Sutras 7.18. 43-44, p. 384.

<sup>17</sup> James L Cook, '*2012 Defense Strategy Review and Financial Year 2013 Defense Budget Request: Strategy and Fiscal Constraints*', *Orbis, A Journal of World Affairs*, Vol.57, No.1, Winter 2013, pp.41-58.

<sup>18</sup> Lukas Milevski, '*The Nature of Strategy versus the Charter of War*', *Comparative Strategy*, Vol.36, No.5, 2016, pp.438-446.

<sup>19</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Collins Classics, London, HarperCollins Publishers, 2011, p.12.