

India's Strategic Culture and its Kautilyan Lineage

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Understanding Strategic Culture

Strategic culture is an 'ideal-type' concept of a socio-ideational reality that has historically evolved, but is not as such empirically representable. Yet, the 'material' impact of strategic culture on the mind-set and behaviour of actors in the field of national security is empirically identifiable. The term 'strategic' (relating to the state, use of force and security) hyphenates with the term 'culture' (lacking a precise and widely accepted definition). Therefore, we have to interrogate briefly the concept of strategic culture before turning to Indian strategic culture and its main ideational ingredient: Kautilya's *Arthashastra*.

In Max Weber's classical definition, the state – pre-modern or modern – is a political entity, which efficaciously exercises the monopoly of legitimate violence on a given territory. The 'state' and 'security' are intrinsically intertwined concepts because the capacity to apply violence constitutes the essence of the sovereign state and is the basis of its internal and external security. For each state, its security has a 'strategic' quality precisely because it relates to the threat of use of force or the actual use of force, thus bearing upon the most fundamental and lasting of state interests, self-preservation.

Next follows the basic recognition that the inherent logic of strategy is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to understand the actual behaviour of actors engaging in external and internal security of a given state. All states pursue a security strategy and there are apparently universally valid 'guiding principles'— anthropological constants, rational choices and systemic constraints — that feature in the strategic conduct of all states. However, the ways in which states conduct strategy are evidently

not uniform. States have different 'orientations' in processing experiences and different preferences, and disinclinations, in their strategic conduct. The recognition of rather evident non-uniformity comes with another one: the diverse attitudes of politico-strategic actors in different states are not random.

Here comes the hyphenation of strategic conduct with 'culture'. During the end phase of the Cold War, scholars in International Relations theory and Security Studies began to interrogate whether the USA and the Soviet Union really had the same axioms and thought patterns with respect to warfare, notably nuclear warfare. Then, Jack Snyder (1977) coined the term strategic culture, which, however, has significant theoretical implications.¹ Rashed uz Zaman has rightly noted, "The concept of strategic culture is as dangerous as an unmarked minefield on a dark night. One of the difficulties of understanding culture stems from the fact that culture is difficult to define and has been the subject of intense debate".²

According to French historian Fernand Braudel, the central characteristic of all cultures is continuity in historical change. Cultures are uniquely resilient and adaptive structures, they exist in the *longue durée*, which covers not some years or decades, but centuries or even millennia. As realities of enormously long duration, cultures – with a virtually infinite adaptability to their fate – exceed all other collective realities in longevity, they literally survive them all... In other words, cultures survive political, social, economic, and even ideological upheavals – actually, at least in part, they covertly dominate them.³

Jawaharlal Nehru has a remarkable understanding of cultural continuity in South Asia. In his *The Discovery of India*, he writes, "I read her [India's] history and read also a part of her abundant ancient literature, and was powerfully impressed by the vigour of thought, the clarity of language, and the richness of mind that lay behind it [...] There seemed to me something unique about the continuity of cultural tradition through five thousand years of history, of invasion and upheaval, a tradition which was widespread among the masses and powerfully influenced them [...] Like some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of

thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously. All of these existed in our conscious and subconscious selves, though we may not have been aware of them".⁴

Cultures are not quasi-crystalline ideational formations that remain fixed across time. Cultures do change but the change will most likely be what Harry Eckstein (1988) has called 'pattern-maintaining change'. Cultural changes are real and substantial, but they do not eradicate the continuity of basic patterns of thinking and acting. It seems that the longevity of cultures depends on their inner elasticity and latitude for diversity. Indian culture, with its cohesion through plurality, would be a case in point.

From the above, we can conclude that when we use the term 'culture' and hyphenate it with strategy, we must factor in the outstanding significance of; the diversity of states' collective experiences; *longue durée* cultural continuity and; the efficacy of the past experiences and ideas upon the present. In a first approximation, we can say that strategic culture refers to historically evolved perceptions, ideas and behavioural patterns with respect to the internal and external security of a state. Of particular importance are early and endogenous 'foundational texts' addressing politico-strategic affairs.

Occasionally, I have heard Indian strategists proclaim: 'India needs a new (offensive or whatever) strategic culture'! However, a strategic culture cannot be constructed or decreed at will. Political actors might pursue strategic policies that radically deviate from the historically evolved strategic culture — but not for long. Actors can modify and redefine foreign and security policies, but sooner, rather than later, such changes will 'snap back' into the elastic frame that strategic culture has established.

To avoid misunderstandings, strategic culture does not 'determine' the patterns of perception, thought and action with respect to the internal and external security of a state. Rather, strategic culture refers to specific dispositions and preferences and rankings thereof in a state's security policy. The concept of

strategic culture presupposes that such dispositions and preferences are not merely the product of situational 'pragmatism' but are conditioned by the respective state's culture and history.

Indian Strategic Culture

When undertaking the empirical analysis of a state's strategic culture, e.g. India, the difficulty of its operationalisation becomes apparent. For China, Al Johnston (1995, 1998) has developed a methodological approach vis-à-vis strategic culture: Search for early, endogenous and formative texts dealing with strategic issues, i.e. Sun Tzu and the *Seven Military Classics*.⁶ These texts are examined for patterns of strategic dispositions and preferences and then compared with strategic practices in later historical period's – down to the present. If a substantive congruence of strategic dispositions and preferences across time can be ascertained, a continuity of strategic thinking and acting and, thus, the existence of a strategic culture can be assumed. Obviously, this approach equally applies to Indian strategic culture – and that means taking Kautilya's *Arthashastra* as the starting point for ascertaining its basic features. This view is also shared by Darryl Howlett and Philip Davies. "Many analysts regard key texts as important in informing actors of appropriate strategic thought and action. Traditional analyses of peace and conflict have long pointed to the influence of such texts throughout history and in different cultural settings. This may follow a historical trajectory from Sun Tzu, who was considered to have written the Art of War during the time of the warring states in ancient China, through the writings of Kautilya in ancient India, and into western understanding as a result of Thucydides' commentary on the Peloponnesian Wars and Clausewitz's writings on the nature of war as a result of observations of the Napoleonic period".⁷ "Even though it passed into obscurity for a substantial interval, the *Arthashastra*'s legacy and influence have been substantial throughout the evolution of politics, strategy, statecraft, and intelligence on the Indian subcontinent, and they remain so today".⁸

However, for the idea-contents of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* to become an efficacious ideational ingredient of Indian strategic

culture, is it not indispensable that actors belonging to the Indian strategic community have thoroughly studied the ancient work? What, if they have not? On precisely this question, I have conducted expert interviews in the Indian strategic community. The answer is surprisingly simple: Most interviewees did not systematically study the *Arthashastra* but were well acquainted with the Indian epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, and the *Panchatantra* fables. While the epics and fables are literary texts, they also address political and strategic issues and do so largely in conformity with Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. Let me quote here the German Indologist Alfred Hillebrandt, "In particular, it is said Book 12 [of the *Mahabharata*] which provides an outline of the main features of ancient Indian political wisdom. It does so vividly, psychologically truthful and without undue detail – and in substantial congruence with Kautilya".⁹

An interesting example of the encounter with Kautilyan thought during primary socialisation is Rabindranath Tagore. In his memoirs, Tagore writes, "[M]y introduction to literature began, by way of the books, which were popular in the realm of the servants [at his family home]. The most important ones were a Bengalese translation of Chanakya's aphorisms [*Chanakya niti*] and the *Ramayana*".¹⁰

Here we come to the sub or semi-conscious impact of Kautilyan thought-figures on Indian strategic culture. For theoretically understanding this impact, Pierre Bourdieu's 'habitus' concept is key, which can be defined as the efficacious presence of past patterns of thought and behaviour in the present.¹¹ That includes the 'active presence' of past ideas that have been 'forgotten' because they are 'taken for granted' or seen as 'common sense'. The habitus is the repository of past ideas, which are 'forgotten' yet, they remain intact and efficacious. The habitus concept does apply to Indian strategic culture because it transcends the exclusivity of the conscious 're-use of the past', i.e. the deliberate reference to past ideas and experiences as the precondition for impacting present thinking and behaviour.¹² Following Bourdieu, I argue that members of the Indian strategic community can be efficaciously, albeit sub or semi-consciously, influenced by the idea-contents of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* –

without having engaged in a thorough study of the *Arthashastra* or having been comprehensively lectured about it in educational contexts.

Two former National Security Advisers – the late JN Dixit and Shivshankar Menon – have pointed to the sub or semi-conscious impact of Kautilyan thought on Indian strategic culture:

“Two contradictory trends have impacted on the wellsprings of India's foreign policy at the subconscious level. One trend is rooted in the school of thought led by Chanakya... The second trend influencing the collective subconscious also ironically originated in the thought processes and political impulses generated by another Mauryan emperor, Ashoka the Great, who was influenced by the teachings of Lord Buddha”.¹³

“[T]here is no gainsaying the fundamental importance of the *Arthashastra* in our thinking... Much of this is unselfconscious and instinctive today”.

Thus, the habitus of the Indian strategic community is the repository of latent Kautilyan idea-contents, even if strategic experts – 'on top of it' – refer discursively to Kautilya.

Indian Strategic Culture and ‘Kautilyan Realism’

As noted by JN Dixit, Indian foreign and security policy is hybrid, encompassing both realist and idealist ideational lineages, which are both consciously and subconsciously efficacious. I argue that ‘Kautilyan realism’ is the predominant endogenous ideational feature of Indian strategic culture relative to endogenous ‘idealist’ and exogenous ideational inputs. However, Kautilyan realism is not ‘pure power politics’ but intrinsically rooted in political normativity (*rajadharma*). To understand the impact of Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* on Indian strategic culture, it is imperative to adequately know its core concepts:

- *Saptanga* theory of the ‘the seven state factors’ (*prakriti*): ruler, government/administration, the people in the

countryside, the fortress/capital city, treasury, army and ally; the aggregate of which constitutes state power.

- Pre-modern idea of *raison d'etat*: (a) obligation to optimise seven state factors ('internal balancing') and; (b) the welfare of the people (*yogakshema*) since both are intertwined for reasons of purposive political rationality as well as political ethics.
- Political anthropology: intra-societal relations and inter-state relations are anarchic (*matsya-nyaya*), therefore monopoly of use of force for the state (ruler) and necessity to politically unify the Indian subcontinent (*mandala scheme*).
- Pre-modern idea of political prudence: use of force in domestic politics as well as foreign relations is ultima ratio and imperial expansion beyond the Indian subcontinent is eschewed.
- *Upayas* cluster: 'the four means of politics': *saman* (conciliation), *dana* (concession), *bheda* (*divide et impera*) and *danda* (use of force).
- *Shadgunya* theory: 'the six methods of foreign policy': peace (*samdhi*), war (*vigraha*), 'wait and see' (*asana*), coercive diplomacy (*yana*), alliance-building (*samshrya*), diplomatic duplicity (*dvaihibhava*). The policy choice depends mainly on the correlation of forces between competing/adversary states.

While there is an idealist lineage of politico-strategic thought that can be associated with Buddhism grounded 'Ashokan statecraft' of prioritising the non-violent policies, peaceful coexistence and diplomacy, Ashoka's Empire possessed enormous power leverage in political, economic and military terms. In India, there is, in my view, also a Persian-Muslim tradition of politico-strategic thought that was hybridised with indigenous classic statecraft during the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal era.¹⁵ There is also a latent, and manifest, British input in Indian strategic culture, notably with respect to maritime strategy.

All these ideational lineages influence Indian strategic culture; however, the strongest lineage is Kautilyan realism.

The scholarly literature on Indian strategic culture is of a rather modest size. Some authors have even denied that Indian strategic culture exists at all, e.g. the so-called 'Tanham debate'. Among most scholars, there is consensus that the Kautilyan realist lineage and the idealist lineage of Buddha-Ashoka-Gandhi are most relevant for Indian strategic culture, but they differ on the relative weight of the influence of these two strands (cf. Kim 2004, Jones 2006, Zaman 2006).¹⁶ However, there are divergent views as well. The most articulate – and puzzling – exception from that consensus is Kanti Bajpai¹⁷ who asserts that; India does not have pre-modern politico-strategic traditions that would be comparable to that of China or Europe; Kautilya does not measure up to neither Sun-Tzu nor Machiavelli; Kautilya is effectively irrelevant for India's strategic culture and; Indian strategic culture is based exclusively in contemporary ideational inputs, which are primarily adopted from the West. In contrast, while acknowledging the influence of the Ashokan tradition, WP Singh Sidhu writes, "Another obvious strand of Indian strategic thought, which has remained constant since the time of Chandragupta Maurya, through even Gandhi's non-violence era and right till the present day (but has been mentioned only in passing in the [Tanham's] essay under review), is the concept of realism. Clearly, it was not described as 'realism' by Kautilya, the official strategist for the Mauryan Empire, as for that matter by Gandhi or Nehru. Yet it is something more than evident in their writings and in their actions".¹⁸

JN Dixit, mentioned above, notes, "It is very important to note, however, the moderate and rational approach to politics and inter-state relations in each stage of the evolution of Indian history as an independent political entity followed a process of political consolidation which required the application of concepts and prescriptions of Chanakya who pre-dated Machiavelli nearly 2000 years. (Chanakya's teachings in statecraft could have taught a lesson or two to Machiavelli)".¹⁹

Conclusion

To sum up, in the discourse on Indian strategic culture, we can see a consensus that Indian strategic culture is grounded in endogenous, pre-modern politico-strategic thought, of which Kautilyan ideas are the major ideational ingredient.

In my view, a promising approach to operationalising Indian strategic culture has been made by Manjeet Pardesi (2005).²⁰ He does not explicitly address the concept of strategic culture; instead, he uses the concept of 'grand strategy', but seems to me more a question of terminology than substance. Pardesi conducts a comparative analysis of the pan-Indian states during the past 2300 year-period: Mauryan Empire, Gupta Empire, Mughal Empire, British Raj, and post-1947 India. His finding is that structural homologies exist in the 'grand strategies' of these polities, the vast time horizon notwithstanding. In other words: There are constants or 'lasting patterns' in the strategic posture and behaviour of these pan-Indian polities even though the political regimes have greatly differed. Among the constants in the strategic posture and behaviour, Pardesi lists the following:

- Moral Realism: Power maximisation, including the use of force if deemed necessary, under a veneer of morality, and insistence on strategic autonomy.
- Regional Hegemony: A consistent drive to overcome political fragmentation of the subcontinent and establish pan-Indian state structures. That includes dedicated efforts to prevent meddling of outside powers into the political affairs of the subcontinent. Equally important is the prioritising of internal security to preserve the integrity and cohesion of the pan-Indian polity.
- Politico-Military Behaviour: Indian statecraft has always been multidimensional. The use-of-force, if deemed necessary, goes along with cooperative diplomacy, coercive diplomacy and covert intelligence operations.
- Defensive Strategic Orientation: Pan-Indian states have consistently aimed at deterring and repulsing outside power,

but not pursued aggressive-expansionist policies against them.

- Adaptability: Pan-Indian states have slowly, but effectively adapted to changes in geopolitical constellations, military technology and war fighting, and economic affairs.

New research results on Indian strategic culture have been submitted. A notable one is Kajari Kamal (2018)²¹, who has correlated Kautilyan core concepts with the empirical analysis on India's foreign and security policies during the Nehruvian period 1947-1964 (nonalignment, relations with China and Pakistan, and nuclear policy) and during 1998-2014 (nuclear doctrine, strategic autonomy, relations with China, Pakistan and USA). Kamal notes regrettably that very few scholars have actually studied the *Arthashastra*, which obstructs an adequate assessment of its impact on Indian strategic culture. Thus, more often than not, Kautilya's pre-modern concept of 'grand strategy' is missed, which encompasses the political, normative, diplomatic, economic, intelligence and cultural dimensions of a state's external and internal security. Kautilya inter-relates 'realist' calculation of hard-power capabilities (military and economic strength) with political normativity (*rajadharma*) in making policy decisions. The central normative paradigm is that all-out-war is *ultima ratio* and 'indirect' strategic policies are preferred. In congruence with Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, Kamal argues, Indian strategic culture has a 'realist' foundation, but rests on deep-seated normative guiding principles as well.

For the Nehruvian period, Kamal's empirical analysis covers India's policy of nonalignment; bilateral relations with China (Panchsheel, Tibet, China seat in UN Security Council) and Pakistan (patient diplomatic engagement, Indus Water Treaty); the duality of demanding global nuclear disarmament and building up of nuclear capacities. Nehru realised that the lack of economic and military strength (Kautilyan *prakriti* aggregate) constrained India's strategic options. After 1998, these power deficiencies were significantly reduced through economic liberalisation, military modernisation and nuclear weaponisation. Still, India adhered to

the principle of strategic autonomy, notably with respect to the USA.

From her empirical analysis of Indian security policy during the Nehruvian era and the post-Pokhran period up to 2014, Kamal concludes that Indian strategic culture features a preference ranking in the following order; (1) 'Accommodation' (diplomacy, 'strategic generosity', self-restraint vis-à-vis terrorist/military provocations); (2) 'Defensive' (nuclear doctrine of no-first-use/credible minimum deterrence; coercive diplomacy, military mobilisation); (3) 'Offensive' (covert operations, 'surgical strikes', war as *ultima ratio*). The three strategic policy options, however, are not necessarily tightly separated but often form fluid combinations. This grand-strategic preference ranking as well as its optional fluidity is evidently in structural homology with the core concepts of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, notably the *shadgunya* and *upayas* clusters.

It needs to be emphasised that India's strategic culture shapes not only its external security policy but equally so its internal security. Empirical analysis of the insurgencies in the North-East, Punjab, and the 'Naxal corridor', Indian counter-insurgency strategies show a clear pattern that is based on the Kautilyan *upayascluster*: *saman, dana, bheda and danda*.²² After much vacillation and flip-flopping in configuring and weighing these four COIN policy options (and much loss of life), eventually the 'right mix' of the *upayas* has been adopted leading to conflict resolution.

In conclusion, I want to refer to my numerous interviews in the Indian strategic community; time and again, I heard the following sentence: 'Kautilya is in the DNA of India's security policy'.

Endnotes

¹ J. Snyder, Jack, 'The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations', The Rand Corporation, (Santa Monica, 1977).

² R.U. Zaman, 'Strategic Culture: A "Cultural" Understanding of War', *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2009, pp. 68-88.

³ F. Braudel, *Schriften zur Geschichte – Gesellschaften und Zeitstrukturen* (Stuttgart, 1992), p. 283.

⁴ J. Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (New Delhi, 1981), pp. 50, 52, 54.

⁵ H. Eckstein, 'A Culturalist Theory of Political Change', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 82, no. 3, 1988, pp. 789-804.

⁶ A.I. Johnston, 'Thinking about Strategic Culture', *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 4, 1995, pp. 32-54.

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⁷ D. Howlett, 'Strategic Culture – Reviewing Recent Literature', *Strategic Insights*, vol. 4, no. 10, 2005. <https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/11212/howlettOct05.pdf?sequence=1>

⁸ P. Davies and K. Gustafson (eds.), *Intelligence Elsewhere – Spies and Espionage outside the Anglosphere* (Georgetown University Press, 2013), p. 63.

⁹ A. Hillebrandt, *Altindische Politik* (Jena, 1923), p. 7.

¹⁰ R. Tagore, *My Reminiscences* (Whitefish, USA, 2004), p. 9.

¹¹ P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge, 1990).

¹² S. Mitra, *Politics in India: Structure, Process and Policy* (London, 2011).

¹³ J.N. Dixit, *India's Foreign Policy 1947-2003* (New Delhi, 2003), p. 24f.

¹⁴ P.K. Gautam, A. Gupta, and S. Mishra (eds.), *Indigenous Historical Knowledge – Kautilya and his Vocabulary* (3 vols, Pentagon Press, 2015), ii.

¹⁵ M. Liebig and S. Mishra (eds.) (2017), *The Arthasatra in a Transcultural Perspective: Comparing Kautilya with Sun-Zi, Nizam al-Mulk, Barani and Machiavelli* (1 vol, Pentagon Press, 2017).

¹⁶ M. Kim, 'India' in J. Glenn and D. Howlett and S. Poore (eds.), *Neorealism vs. Strategic Culture* (Aldershot, UK, 2018), p. 13.

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¹⁷ K Bajpai and S. Basit and V. Krishnappa (eds.), *India's Grand Strategy – History, Theory, Cases* (Delhi, 2014), p. 10.

¹⁸ W.P.S. Sidhu, W.P. Singh, 'Of Oral Traditions and Ethocentric Judgments' in K. Bajpai, Kanti and A. Mattoo (eds.), *Securing India: Strategic Thought and Practice* (Delhi, 1996), pp. 174–212.

¹⁹ Dixit, *India's Foreign Policy 1947-2003*, p. 24f.

²⁰ M.S. Pardesi, 'Deducing India's Grand Strategy of Regional Hegemony from historical and Conceptual perspectives' *Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies Working Paper Series*, (Singapore, 2005).

²¹ K. Kamal, 'Kautilya's Arthashastra: Indian Strategic Culture and Grand Strategic Preferences', *Journal of Defence Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2018, pp. 27-54.

²² Goswami, Namrata (2015): *Indian national security and counter-insurgency: the use of force vs non-violent response*. London: Routledge.

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