

Kautilya and Sun Tzu on Sino-Indian Strategy: 1962 and Today

Introduction

The tensions between India and China show signs of easing, as both governments have announced the end of the four-year military stand-off at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh. New Delhi stated that the agreement on patrolling and disengagement along the LAC aimed to achieve “disengagement and a resolution of the issues that emerged in these areas in 2020”. Meanwhile, in Beijing, the Chinese Foreign Ministry confirmed that China and India had been in “close communication” and had reached “a resolution on the relevant matter”, which China views positively.^[i]

This development comes after External Affairs Minister (EAM) of India, Dr S. Jaishankar, speaking at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington on 1 Oct 2024, pointed to China’s violation of previous border agreements in 2020 as a major cause of the ongoing tension.^[ii] Since the 2020 Galwan River Valley clash along the LAC, both countries have continuously deployed over 1,00,000 troops in testing weather conditions in the western Himalayan region along the disputed border. After several rounds of talks between senior military officials, plans were drawn for troop disengagement and restoration of military patrol arrangements before the 2020 stand-off. However, this return to the status quo and positive outlook is overshadowed by distrust and unresolved grievances.

The conflict between India and China can be traced back to the Sino-Indian War of 1962, which marked the beginning of tensions between the two nations. On the 62nd anniversary of the war, this conflict should be critically studied to understand modern geopolitical strategy and military misjudgment. The war exposed strategic miscalculations and flawed assumptions about capabilities and intentions. These blunders can be analysed through the principles of strategy espoused by two ancient strategists, Kautilya (Indian strategist, economist and politician, minister in the Kingdom of Chandragupta Maurya during 317-293 BCE) and Sun Tzu (Chinese military general, strategist, philosopher, and writer). Despite the resolution, as tensions continue to simmer along the LAC, the same principles of intelligence gathering, strategic flexibility, and a deep understanding of the adversary are just as crucial.

By applying the lessons from 1962, India and China can better navigate their current disputes, avoid repeating past mistakes, and work toward stabilising a relationship that remains fragile and volatile. This paper is an attempt to draw analogies between steps taken by both countries, primarily India, during the 1962 war, how they deviate from the principles of Kautilya and Sun Tzu, and why their lessons dominate contemporary bilateral relations.

Kautilya’s Strategic Wisdom

Kautilya, in his work *Arthashastra*, placed immense importance on the role of spying and intelligence gathering, establishing it as a cornerstone of governance and military strategy. In Kautilya’s view, effective espionage was indispensable for a ruler to maintain control internally and navigate foreign relations.^[iii] Conversely, India’s intelligence failure was a significant factor in its defeat, a shortcoming that runs contrary to Kautilya’s teachings. According to former Army Chief General V. K. Singh, India’s lack of preparedness, coupled with inadequate intelligence on Chinese intentions, was a major contributor to the military debacle.^[iv] Chinese troops were

well-informed, knowing precisely where Indian forces were deployed, while Indian intelligence failed to detect Chinese movements and plans. This oversight meant Indian troops were sent into battle without adequate equipment or preparation, and while their morale remained high, their lack of strategic intelligence left them vulnerable to Chinese advances.

Additionally, the absence of diplomatic measures to assess China's intentions led to India's miscalculations. Kautilya advocated for the use of diplomacy (as extension of war) and intelligence in tandem, ensuring that military actions were guided by a clear understanding of the adversary's intentions.^[v] India's failure to engage China diplomatically or gather political intelligence resulted in misreading China's strategic goals and preparedness.

This gap in intelligence, both military and diplomatic, underscores how India's defeat in 1962 was not just a failure of war tactics but of strategic foresight. Had Kautilya's principles of intelligence been fully applied, India might have been better positioned to anticipate China's moves and respond with appropriate force and strategy.

Sun Tzu's Art of Deception

China's use of strategic deception and surprise, deeply rooted in Sun Tzu's principles, played a critical role in the Sino-Indian War of 1962 and continue to shape its military strategy. Sun Tzu's *Art of War* emphasises the importance of catching the enemy off guard, acting before the enemy can strike, with the goal of winning quickly and decisively.^[vi] China's approach in 1962 was a textbook example of these teachings, with Beijing successfully blending deception and surprise to outmanoeuvre India. The sudden invasion from two fronts was precisely timed during the Cuban Missile Crisis, when global attention was diverted.^[vii] This strategic brilliance not only highlighted China's advanced thinking, but also underscored how unprepared India was to counter such a sophisticated attack.

In Master Sun Tzu's words, "The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting".^[viii] China destabilised India's neighbourhood through calculated moves, such as its military engagements with Vietnam and its territorial advances, and created an environment where India is constantly encircled. These actions reflect Sun Tzu's belief in weakening an adversary by creating hostility around it. The 1962 war, thus, serves as a reminder of how China effectively applied Sun Tzu's strategic principles, showcasing its ability to mask true intentions while using military deception to strike at the most opportune moments.

In modern times, this legacy of deception continues to shape China's grand strategy, from its ambiguous stance on Taiwan to its refusal to accept territorial status quos with neighbours. India's experience in 1962 is a stark lesson to be vigilant in anticipating China's strategic surprises.

How are These Masters Influencing Contemporary India-China Relations?

Recent incidents such as the Doklam Plateau standoff in 2017 and the Galwan Valley clashes in 2020 serve as key examples of how strategic wisdom from both Kautilya and Sun Tzu can inform modern responses.

China's approach in both Doklam and Galwan reflects Sun Tzu's principles, where strategic positioning and psychological advantage are prioritised to win without engaging in full-scale conflict.^[ix] In Doklam, China tried to push its territorial claims by building roads and infrastructure to gain tactical advantage, creating momentum, and forcing India into a reactive posture.^[x] The intelligence failure of 1962 and the Galwan Valley clash in 2020 reveal a

recurring gap in India's national security apparatus, signaling that India has yet to fully learn from its past mistakes. In both instances, India was blindsided by China, failing to anticipate the magnitude of Beijing's military actions.

Kautilya would have viewed these failures as grave strategic miscalculations. He would likely argue that India's inconsistent attempts to strengthen its intelligence systems is symbolic of a larger failure to anticipate the actions of its rivals. In his words, preparing for war and foreseeing the enemy's moves were integral to maintaining state power.^[xi] If India truly wants to address the strategic missteps, it must heed to Kautilya's lessons: build a robust, synchronised intelligence network that acts swiftly, and prioritise intelligence as a key element of national defence, ensuring that information reaches the highest levels of decision-making in real time.^[xii]

In practical terms, India does appear to follow Kautilya's philosophy, which places *artha* (wealth) above all. Kautilya inverted the traditional Hindu order of the *Purusharthas*—*dharma* (righteousness), *artha* (wealth), *kama* (desire), and *moksha* (liberation).^[xiii] By prioritising *artha*, Kautilya argued that wealth creation is the foundation for a stable society, which will eventually allow for a life led by *dharma*. This pragmatic approach underpins Kautilya's political science, where the generation and protection of wealth serve as the highest priorities of governance.

China has emerged as India's largest trading partner in 2023-24, suggesting that despite the ongoing territorial disputes, economic pragmatism dominates India's approach.^[xiv] Does the deepening trade relationship signal a shift in India's strategic priorities? EAM Jaishankar clarifies that trade between the two nations has become almost autonomous.^[xv] The Indian government's emphasis on protecting the nation's sources of livelihood, rooted in trade and commerce, reflects Kautilya's vision of political realism. However, unlike Kautilya, who placed morality in the backseat, India continues to maintain an ethical and moral stance in its diplomacy. India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval had high-level talks with Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi, but no actual progress can be seen.^[xvi]

Beijing, on the other hand, continues to emphasise broader bilateral relations, diverting attention from the border disputes, misleadingly suggesting cooperation and disengagement.^[xvii] As Chinese spokesperson Lin Jian recently stated, "The area of Zangnan is Chinese territory, and it's illegal and null and void for India to set up the so-called Arunachal Pradesh in Chinese territory?", affirming China's firm stance.^[xviii] China's diplomatic language of de-escalation and progress seems disconnected from its actions on the ground. Its obstructive behaviour is part of a wider strategy to undermine India's international standing. China has repeatedly blocked India's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group and dismissed India's attempts to reform the United Nations (UN) Security Council.^[xix]

China also uses its influence to block India's efforts to designate Pakistan-based terrorists under the UN's list of global terrorists.^[xx] Beijing's lack of efforts in the negotiations puts India under the influence that resolving the border issue will be an overall improvement in India-China relations. This duality reflects Sun Tzu's philosophy of war, where deception plays a critical role in gaining advantage over adversaries. By projecting a false sense of stability, China aims to undermine India's resolve and distract global attention from the ongoing border tensions.

The teachings of these ancient masters serve as a reminder that modern day strategy and contemporary bilateral relations are as much about perception and positioning as it is about military strength.

Conclusion: The Jungle of Power

62 years ago, Chinese troops entered the Indian territory to make a point. The first war between the two Asian giants was a message by Mao Zedong to Jawaharlal Nehru, that China did not consider India an equal.^[xxi] Decades later, this dynamic seems to be somewhat evolving. Beijing continues to disregard New Delhi's concerns over the border dispute, being skeptical and keeping New Delhi on the edge by threatening to unilaterally change the status quo. Following Sun Tzu in letter and spirit, China has intensified strategic encirclement (Belt and Road Initiative) and military posturing. Despite positive developments in negotiations, China's real miscalculation lies in dismissing India's autonomy and its power to change the regional dynamics, being a key player in the Indo-Pacific. India, on the other hand, faces a 'China Problem' that goes beyond the immediate standoff, which is a broader challenge in dealing with an increasingly aggressive neighbour, who threatens the status quo.^[xxii]

For Kautilya, power means the possession of strength, and strength changes the mind. Hence, the real goal is to acquire power which controls the enemy. According to him, "The state of relations between States is like a jungle where the strength of the lion prevails".^[xxiii] In this 'Jungle', the two Asian giants are constantly in a battle, making economic strength and strategic acumen the most valuable assets. India's strategic balancing, exemplified through initiatives like the QUAD and its deepening ties with other global powers, follows Kautilya's philosophy of building strength through multi-layered alliances (Mandala Theory) and economic resilience.

End Notes

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Akankshya Ray is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in Conflict Analysis and Peacebuilding at the Nelson Mandela Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Jamia Millia Islamia. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science (Honours) from the University of Delhi. Her academic interests include conflict analysis, strategy, peacebuilding, and peacemaking.

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