

# Kautilya's Strategic Management in the Current Indian Context

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## ABSTRACT

Kautilya, also known as Chanakya or Vishnugupta, is believed to have been responsible for the rise of Chandragupta Maurya to the throne of Magadha in 321 BC. Once he had fulfilled his dream of destroying the Nanda Empire and had ensured that Chandragupta was fully trained and empowered he withdrew to write his magnum opus "The Arthashastra". The Arthashastra encapsulates the science dealing with state affairs in the internal as well as the external sphere ie it is the science of statecraft or of politics and administration.

Kautilya's Arthashastra is a classical work of Strategic Management and can be considered as the foundational text for modern day International Relations. The Western socialist Max Weber was among the first to recognize and understand the importance of the Arthashastra and its relevance to the present, when he undertook religious studies on Hinduism (Politics as Vocation and Sociology of Religion).

The article endeavors to understand the relevance of the Saptanga Theory which is the basis for the Shadgunya Theory – the six ways of conducting Foreign Policy in the current Indian context. It is evident that Kautilya's teachings have significant relevance, both in the present and foreseeable future, for the conduct of strategic policy and warfare in the International and more so in the Indian context.

"Om. Salutation to Sukra and Brahaspati"

"This single (treatise on the) Science of Politics has been prepared mostly by bringing together (the teaching of) as many treatises on the Science of Politics as have been composed by ancient teachers for the acquisition and protection of earth" (1:1:1)<sup>1</sup>.

## I. KAUTILYA – A PRIMER<sup>1</sup>

Kautilya, also known as Chanakya or Vishnugupta, is believed to have been responsible for the rise of Chandragupta Maurya to the throne of Magadha in 321 BC. The popular history has it that on being humiliated by Dhana Nanda, the Nanda king at his court, Chanakya vowed to uproot his dynasty. During his wanderings, he came across Chandragupta Maurya. For some reason, he sensed in him great potential and took him under his wings, motivated and guided him into raising an army and ultimately succeeded in his objective of destroying the mighty Nanda empire. Thereafter, he retired to pen his magnum opus Arthashastra – the strategic management of politics. It is further believed that Kautilya, Chanakya or Vishnugupta all refer to the same person.

The word 'Artha' is the sustenance or livelihood of men; in other words, it means 'the earth inhabited by men'. Arthashastra is the science, which is the means of the acquisition and protection of the earth. Thus, Arthashastra is understood as the science dealing with state affairs in the internal as well as the external sphere ie it is the science of statecraft or the science of politics and administration.

However, the study of Kautilya's Arthashastra has to be tempered, by the realism that the world has definitely moved on, especially since the Industrial and Informational Ages. The significant changes include:

- (a) Nation states have emerged since the Treaty of Westphalia<sup>2</sup> of 1648 and have replaced monarchies.

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<sup>1</sup>This is the opening shloka of Kautilya Arthashastra which follows the invocation of Om and salutation to Sukra and Brahaspati. (1:1:1) refers to Book one, Chapter one and Shloka one of The Kautilya Arthashastra.

<sup>2</sup>The Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 brought to an end the Thirty Years War (1618-48) in Europe and heralded the concept of sovereign state.

- (b) Democracy has spread its roots wide and deep and a more egalitarian society is on the upswing, albeit with glaring exceptions.
- (c) The idea of war as the 'preferred option' to settle disputes has been largely replaced by war as the 'frowned upon option' in international forum.
- (d) Economics and trade in an increasingly globalised and interdependent world have become major players in the arena of international relations. Multi National Corporations have grown in stature, power and influence.
- (e) Religion as a factor has gained disproportionately greater prominence in international relations.
- (f) Terrorism and fourth generation warfare have begun to alter fundamentally the rules of warfare.
- (g) Human migration and the consequent influence - positive and negative - of Diasporas have created subtle pressure points.

## II. KAUTILYA'S TEACHINGS ON STRATEGIC AFFAIRS

'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' (7.18.42)

In the Arthashastra, Kautilya enunciated his famous Saptanga Theory: the seven state factors, which provides a 'benchmark' for assessing the correlation of forces between states and is the basis for the Shadgunya Theory. These theories give out Kautilya's six measures of Strategic affairs and its four pillars of Sam, Dhan, Bhed and Dand which have some resemblance to the modern day strategies of Compellance<sup>3</sup> and Deterrence<sup>4</sup> and are clearly focused on outwitting the enemy as and when one's powers are augmented. This may partially be true even in modern times, but excessive obsession with 'winning' or outwitting another state is steadily losing its relevance in modern times. Kautilya was one of the earliest proponents of real politik and today we can classify Kautilya's teachings as belonging to the realistic school of strategic management in international relations.

**The Six Measures of Strategic Policy.** Strategic policy as Kautilya enunciated it in his times dealt with war and peace and it was intricately connected to national security. As per Kautilya, there are six measures of foreign policy. These are peace, war, staying quiet, seeking shelter, marching and dual policy. "Entering into a treaty is peace, doing injury is war, remaining indifferent is staying quiet, augmentation of powers is marching, submitting to another is seeking shelter, resorting to peace (with one) and war (with another) is dual policy". Further, he states, "When in decline as compared to the enemy, he should make peace. When prospering, he should make war." (When he thinks) 'The enemy is not able to do harm to neither me, nor I to him', he should stay quiet. When possessed of a preponderance of excellent qualities, he should march. Depleted in power, he should seek shelter. In a work that can be achieved with the help of an associate, he should resort to a dual policy (7.1.13-18).

**Four Pillars of Strategic Policy.** Kautilya was also famous for popularizing the age-old Indian thought of Sam, Dhan, Bhed and Dand to overcome opponents. Sam means adopting a conciliatory attitude; Dhan means winning over/placating with rewards and gifts; Bhed implies sowing dissension and Dand involves use of force. Kautilya's teachings on Sam, Dhan, Bhed and Dand have resonance in modern day use of diplomatic and coercive power. The four methods could be used singly or in combination of two or three or all together.

(a) **Sama.** Sama essentially involves elements of psychological and perception management thus winning over the hearts and minds of the adversary / potential adversary. It can be sensed repeatedly in statements or actions of world leaders eg Obama espousing "strategic reassurance" with respect to China, Dr Manmohan Singh's statement that the world is "big enough to accommodate a growing China and India", Prime Minister Modi inviting all the leaders of South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation countries for his inauguration and following it up with his first two overseas visits to immediate neighbours - "best friend" Bhutan and Nepal and more recently Nethanyahu calling India Israel ties "a partnership made in heaven".

(b) **Dhan** (Placating with Gifts). "Favour and exemptions or employment in works is gifts", Dhan is a time-tested way of winning over allies / adversaries / fence sitters. The nuclear deal India signed with US, against severe hurdles,

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<sup>3</sup> 'By threatening to use force, gets another state to do something to undo an act that it has undertaken.' – Mingst, Karen A, Essentials of International Relations, p.116.

<sup>4</sup> 'States commit themselves to punish a target state if the target state takes an undesired action. Threat or actual war is used as an instrument of policy to dissuade state from pursuing certain courses of action. If the target state does not take the undesired action, deterrence is successful and conflict is avoided. If it does choose to act despite the deterrent threat, then the first state will deliver an unacceptable blow – Mingst, Karen A, Essentials of International Relations, pp116 – 117.

the grant of Major Non-Northern Alliance Treaty Organisation Ally<sup>5</sup> status to Pakistan by the United States, India relinquishing claims over Katchathivu to Sri Lanka, according Most Favoured Nation Status to other countries, launching the “South Asia Satellite”, signing defence deals, facilitating sanction of International Monetary Fund / World Bank loans, grants and aids, swift response during calamities like Tsunami, evacuation of all nationalities from Yemen or simply Obama celebrating Diwali and Gurupurab in White House are a few of the numerous examples of ‘Dhan’ in play.

(c) **Bhed** (Sowing Dissension). Kautilya states that creating apprehension and reprimanding is dissension. Thus Bhed plays on the mind, feeding on fear, suspicion, hatred or enmity. Secret agents employing overt and covert means and propaganda/ psychological warfare are best suited to create dissensions in the opponent’s ranks. Countries do not talk about the use of Bhed (dissension) in public, but in actual practice, use it liberally to divide the people within a country or break up alliances amongst nations. Pakistan’s attempts in Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab and North East are classic examples of employing Bhed (dissension). The skilful weaning away of erstwhile Warsaw Pact states and breakaway states of Union of Soviet Socialist Republic and Yugoslavia by the United States led Northern Alliance Treaty Organisation is another example.

(d) **Dand** (Use of Force). The use of force to resolve conflicts needs no elaboration. However, use of force is a measure of last resort when all else has failed, as war would entail losses in men and material to the victor too. Thus, Kautilya, though repeatedly in this Sastra emphasizes on outwitting an opponent, advocates war as a weapon of last resort. Dand or use of force is recommended by Kautilya as a weapon of last resort as he says that going to war would entail losses – losses of men and material. Today, countries try to exhaust all available means short of force (Dand) to influence the behaviour of another state. Diplomacy as in the case of Doklam and economic sanctions as in the case of North Korea are permitted to run their course before the option of the use of military force is exercised.

### III. STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT - NEIGHBOR AS ENEMY

(a) Kautilya is famous (or infamous) for propounding that one’s neighbour is an enemy and the neighbour’s neighbour who is once removed from the ‘would-be conqueror’ is a friend. While every neighbour cannot be considered an enemy, shared borders do offer fertile grounds for promotion of enmity. Common ethnicity amongst border population, competition for resources like water, access to sea, disputed borders, historical animosities, tussle for regional sphere of influence are factors conducive to igniting/fuelling enmity. It must be remembered that in Kautilyan society land warfare was the only mode of fighting. India realized this when its formal and ambiguous relationships with countries such as Iran and Afghanistan (neighbour’s of Pakistan) had resulted in the former providing sanctuary to Pakistani military aircraft during 1965 War. Although Afghanistan had remained non-committal, it showed some emotional support to Pakistan during the conflict. Thus Indira Gandhi swiftly moved to repair the relationships with both Iran and Afghanistan<sup>6</sup>, which continues till today with India investing a great deal of time, energy and money to extend its stake in Afghanistan, besides signing the Chabahar port development agreement with Iran. China’s interests in South Asian countries especially Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Indo- Soviet relation’s vis-à-vis China all underscores the relevance of this Kautilyan thought.

(b) The Mandala Theory of considering one’s neighbour as an enemy and the enemy’s enemy as friend do have their skeptics. When viewed in Indo-Pak or India - China context, it may appear true but there are many examples of developed nation states, which were sworn enemies in the past living in harmony as neighbours. However, it was only 70-90 years back the world witnessed the devastating World Wars where neighbours fought bitterly and alliances were formed to outwit the opponents. Probably when all the countries of the world grow prosperous and also realize warfare is a terrible and unjustifiable calamity to mankind, things would improve; until then, Kautilyan teachings would continue to be relevant.

**Perception Management:** Kautilya was master of mind games. These are relevant to even Counter Insurgency/Counter Terrorism Operations too. He lays great store in winning over the host population. His exhortations to respect the local culture and customs as well as show them due honour has universal applicability. ‘Only a fool learns from his own experience; the wise learn from other’s experience’ goes an old saying. The world would have definitely benefited had it paid close attention to some of the Kautilyan teachings with respect to treatment of conquered territory. When a politician dresses up in local attire during visits to different regions of the country or an

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<sup>5</sup> Major Non-Nato Ally is a designation given by US government to exceptionally close allies who have close strategic working relations with American forces but are not members of NATO. This confers a variety of military and financial advantages that otherwise are not obtainable by countries not in NATO. Reference-  
[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Major\\_non\\_NATO\\_ally](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Major_non_NATO_ally) accessed on 07/12/09.

<sup>6</sup> Dixit, JN, Makers of Indian Foreign Policy, p. 124.

Obama lights a lamp and folds his hands in the traditional Indian way in White House on Diwali, they sub-consciously reflect the wise sage's teachings though in a different context altogether.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Kautilya's Arthashastra is a treatise rooted in Indian sub continent and is the distilled, recorded wisdom of a number of centuries of warfare, administration and diplomacy. Thus, Arthashastra is the science of statecraft. Presently democracy, terrorism, communism, etc are issues, which have come to dominate the world, but these were alien thoughts during his time. He could neither have visualized the use of air, water, space and cyber space as frontiers of warfare nor foreseen the employment of Chemical Biological Radiological and Nuclear weapons or tanks.

A detailed study of Kautilya's Arthashastra enriches one's knowledge of warfare, diplomacy and administration. It also triggers a number of thoughts and emotions. Why has the nation neglected homegrown thinking and embraced things foreign? Is the neglect due to ignorance or it was a result of a deep study? Is there anything to learn from Arthashastra or the evolutions of strategic statecraft and revolutions in military and other affairs have rendered it dated? There's still a lot to learn from Kautilya's Arthashastra, even in modern times, both in the field of international relations and warfare.

Yet, one thing has not changed – the primordial sense of selfishness and insecurity in human beings – the prime driver of all inter-personal and interstate relations. The timeless nature of Kautilya's teachings have significant relevance, both in the present and foreseeable future, for the conduct of strategic policy and warfare in the Indian context is relevant even today and it is a sincere hope that India will imbibe the lessons of Kautilya's thoughts to enable India attain her rightful place in the global community.

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