

Kautilya's Ideas for Diplomacy and its reflection in India's Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Kautilya (also known as Chanakya), was India's political strategic thinker and philosopher of the 4th century B.C., during Chandragupta Maurya's reign. While, Arthashastra received wider recognition across the world for his state-building theories, in terms of Kautilya's contribution to the strategic thought in realpolitik, Kautilya's work has long been neglected not only by Western scholars but even sometimes by the Indian intellectual community. India, for a long, was recognized as the land of spirituality with a lack of rationality, and the discovery of Arthashastra made those perceptions irrelevant. While, there are other factors such as technological developments with nuclear deterrence and factors of globalization in cross-border trade and commerce, India's foreign policy outlook has considered the realm of international affairs based on Arthashastra, which will be deciphered in this paper. Stressing the notion of 'state' and a comparative analysis of Kautilya's state with that of the Western scholars and the current interpretation of 'state', the article will delve deeper into the doctrine of elements of the state, and their role in dealing with foreign policy. Analyzing the concept of 'Vijigishu' or central kingdom propagates in Kautilya's 'Mandala theory, and what is 'enemy' in foreign relations, the article will try to understand how the classic scripture is still relevant in India's foreign policy choices. Contextually, the article will put appropriate examples to establish the fact that Kautilya's Arthashastra has significantly influenced the decision-making in Indian diplomacy.

Keywords: Arthashastra, Kautilya, State, Foreign policy, Diplomacy State-building, Vijigishu, Mandala theory, Seven Prakritis, Strategic thought.

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Introduction

Kautilya (also known as Chanakya) was India's political strategic thinker and philosopher of the 4th century B.C., during Chandragupta Maurya's reign. As per the early texts, Chanakya was responsible for education and then became the Prime Minister of Chandragupta. This was a time of great instability in North West India. The disintegration nature of the Northwest kingdoms and later the fear of Greek invasion by Alexander they had to deal with. It was Kautilya's persistent guidance and strategy that Chandragupta was able to dethrone Dhanananda and overrun the Greeks and other Indian rulers in Northwest India. The Indian subcontinent, under the rule of Chandragupta guided by Kautilya, for the first time in ancient India, became united. Kautilya has two celebrated works- Arthshastra and Nitishastra.

In 2021, in the article titled: "Beyond Eurocentrism: Kautilya's Realism and India's Regional Diplomacy", published in Nature Magazine, Kautilya was referred to as the 'first great political realist' (Dar, 2021). However, since the time of eighteenth century, western scholars started to appreciate the classic work of 'Arthashastra'. In the essay "Politics as a Vocation", Max Weber, the renowned scholar of statecraft and bureaucracy, characterizes Arthashastra, as a classic work of realism school of thought (Liebig, 2013). Later on, several Western scholars referred to Kautilya as one of the prominent scholars in the political realm. The book, "The First Great Political Realist", by Roger Boesche has referred to the Arthashastra as the first comprehensive document of political realism, a few centuries back to the advent of Thucydides or the Machiavellian school of thought (Boesche, 2003).

Arthashastra, comprises of 15 books including 150 chapters, deals with economy, statecraft, law, military, diplomacy, and foreign policy. While, Arthashastra received wider recognition across the world for his state-building theories, in terms of Kautilya's contribution to the strategic thought in realpolitik, Kautilya's work has long been neglected not only by Western scholars but even sometimes by the Indian intellectual community. Referring to Kautilya's ideas, Prof. Jayant Bandopadhyaya opined that compared to the so-called father of Western realism thought, Hans J Morgenthau who is confused between means and end, Kautilya is clearer that the 'end is happiness and means is the power to achieve that' (Chakraborti, 2016). India, for a long, was recognized as the land of spirituality with a lack of rationality, and the discovery of

Arthashastra made those perceptions irrelevant. Indian leaders from the first Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru to P.M Narendra Modi keep referring to the concept in Arthashastra as an elementary for shaping foreign policy in successive timelines.

While, there are other factors such as technological developments with nuclear deterrence and factors of globalization in cross-border trade and commerce, India's foreign policy outlook has considered the realm of international affairs based on Arthashastra, which will be deciphered in this paper. Stressing the notion of 'state' and a comparative analysis of Kautilya's state with that of the Western scholars and the current interpretation of 'state', the article will delve deeper into the doctrine of elements of the state, and their role in dealing with foreign policy. Analyzing the concept of 'Vijigishu' or central kingdom propagates in Kautilya's 'Mandala theory, and what is 'enemy' in foreign relations, the article will try to understand how the classic scripture is still relevant in India's foreign policy choices. Contextually, the article will put appropriate examples to establish the fact that Kautilya's Arthashastra has significantly influenced the decision-making in Indian diplomacy.

Kautilya's state and its elements: assessing from the foreign policy perspective

The doctrine of 'Seven Prakriti' or 'the Saptanga theory' is one of the chief components of Kautilya's Arthashastra. The ideas of political statecraft were the underlying factor for giving the image of the ideal kingdom. To understand the Saptanga theory, first one needs to develop the basis of the concept of 'State'. Kautilya, notably, rejects the notion of the 'divine origin of the monarch, rather, for him, monarchy is a human institution. In Kautilya's conceptualization of the state, two objectives are of utmost importance: one is the practice of 'Dharma', where the state is perceived to have the responsibilities being 'Rakshak' (Protector) and 'Palak' (Nurturer) (Singh, 2004).

The earliest Western notion of social contract theory, propounded by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Rousseau, in a similar context, a few centuries back, Indian political thinker Kautilya also provides the basis for establishing the institution of 'state'. He imagines the 'state of nature' was complete 'Matsyanaya' or 'anarchy', when the people give the rights to maintain the law and order to the state. People agreed to pay taxes to the 'state' in exchange for their well-being and

security. However, unlike Western contractualism, Kautilya does not use the contract to give the state absolute power.

Unlike the radical realistic thought of Machiavelli, the welfare of the people is the ‘ethical obligation’ of Kautilya’s state. However, the Machiavellian school’s propagation of the state as an empowered entity matches with Kautilya’s state when it comes to foreign policy, the state should have the authority to shape it conveniently. As stated in the book “Kautilya and the non-western IR Theory”, Kautilya’s theory should be considered the ‘Eclectic theory’, in between idealism and realism in international relations (Shahi et al., 2019). Interestingly, although Aristotle and Kautilya belong to the contemporary age, Aristotle’s thought of equating state with nature, where people assumed to be living a community life, is in direct contrast with Kautilya’s definition of ‘state’ (Mondal, 2017).

Though the notion of the modern state is a new invention only after the Westphalian treaty, to make a consensus, the state should have a defined territory, people, currency, governance model, and so on. After taking care of these criteria only, the United Nations Organization (UNO) considers the membership of a ‘state’ (United Nations, 2024). Surprisingly, Kautilya, the non-Western ancient political thinker, and statesman provides certain concrete elements for giving an entity ‘statehood’ status. It is Kautilya, who set some similar elements, centuries back from the Westphalian notion of ‘state’, to differentiate between state and non-state elements (Jindal, 2019). Among the Doctrine of the Seven Prakritis, ‘Swami’ or the ruler is the soul of the body, and the other six elements are necessary for the proper functioning of the same. This article will not explain the elements in detail but will focus specifically on how these seven elements still apply in the contemporary context specially to influence the foreign policy of India.

In Kautilya’s state, ‘Swami’ has extensive authority but he also highlights the imperative of the ruler’s ‘ethical obligation’ for the welfare of its people. However, in terms of shaping inter-state relations, Kautilya gives the ruler to think independently of its internal policies. Kautilya, who appears to be a pragmatic thinker, knows the cruciality of leadership qualities in the ruler (Human, 2020). Leadership influences foreign policy significantly. For example, India, during the period of PM Jawaharlal Nehru had an ‘idealistic’ approach to foreign policy, while the Indira

Gandhi doctrine of India's foreign policy was based on pragmatism. The military intervention of India in the Liberation War of erstwhile East Pakistan in 1971 is a classic example of a major shift in India's foreign policy. The next element of Kautilya's state is 'Amatya' (Minister), which can be specifically considered as India's foreign affairs minister in this context. The minister of foreign affairs appears to have the ground experience and expertise in the international political realm. Understandably, the drafting of India's foreign policy has a significant contribution of the foreign affairs ministers at every time. As suggested by Kautilya, as a precaution against potential conspiracies, the ruler should balance with having three Amatyas. Thus, in inter-state relations, apart from the foreign affairs minister, the defense minister and finance minister also play a crucial role in shaping foreign policy.

Regarding the element of 'Durga' or fortified capital' to defend the territory, it is the tangible representation of the state's defensive capabilities. Hence, in contemporary times, there can be a comparison between 'Durga' and the concept of 'nuclear deterrence' as a means of defense. Theoretically, the 'security dilemma' during the Cold War era has maximized the acquisition of 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' (WMD). Putting the example of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War, Ukraine is not a nuclear power, and Ukraine got security assurances from Russia, the U.S., and the U.K. regarding its sovereignty after signing the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1994 (UN, 1994). From this current example, it is understandable that 'Durga' in contemporary times refers to having defensive capability with WMD. Although, India, being a signatory of the 'No First Use Policy', can claim that its nuclear doctrine is a defensive measure, countries like Pakistan, a hostile neighbor of India, or North Korea as a 'rogue state' might lead to the situation of an 'Offensive-Defensive Dilemma'. In 2019, India's Defence Minister Mr. Rajnath Singh signaled that India reserves the right to change its 'no-first-use policy' for its nuclear doctrine (NDTV, 2019).

The fourth element 'Janapada' refers to the territory inhabited by people, and holds significance as the source of revenues. Kautilya emphasizes the king's responsibility for the well-being and security of the people. Applying this concept in foreign policy, India has nearly 18 million diasporas, the largest diaspora community in the world. India, biennially organized Non-Resident India (NRI) Day on 9th January to acknowledge the immense contributions of the Indian

diasporas abroad regarding businesses, investment, intellectual discourse, and so on (The Economist, 2023). Reciprocally, the Indian embassy in the respective countries is responsible for taking care of the diaspora community if they face any trouble. The foundational principle of assuming embassies as a country's territory can be connected to the concept of 'Janapada'. Apart from the diaspora, in 2023, during India's G20 presidency, Indian government has adopted a 'bottom-up' approach to make all the people of India proud and to make them realize the key drivers of India's growth story.

Kautilya's next element in state-building is 'Bala' or army is deemed a critical requisite for the stability and protection of the state. The next element 'Kosha' or the treasury is deemed necessary to support the king in undertaking welfare functions. The two elements 'Bala' and 'Kosha' are part of the state's hard power element in foreign policy. The next element 'Mitra' is the key to the foreign policy of any country. Kautilya differentiates between two types of Mitras- 'Sahaja' (Natural) and 'Kritrim' (Artificial). In India's context, Bhutan is 'Sahaja mitra' and the U.S. is the 'Kritrim mitra' coming closer to fulfilling certain objectives.

Four principles of Kautilya's foreign policy

Kautilya's vision for foreign policy was marked by strategic thought, aiming at elevating the strength of the monarch not only on the domestic front but in the international arena. Kautilya outlines six approaches in foreign policy:

Sam (Peace)

Under this policy, a country needs to maintain its peaceful relations with the other countries. India's 'Friendship Agreement' with its neighbors is an example of India's efforts to make diplomatic relations friendly. PM J.L. Nehru's 'Panchsheel doctrine' also portrays the connections with Kautilya's thought (mea.gov.in). India's current attempt to normalize the border situation with China since the Galwan Valley happened in 2020 is also India's effort towards maintaining the status quo with the implementation of Kautilya's policy of 'Sam'.

Dam (Economic diplomacy)

As Kautilya in his 'Mandala theory' states that 'the immediate neighbor is the natural enemy'. Considering this principle, economic cooperation should be used as a diplomatic tool for

the ‘natural enemy’. In 2023, India and Bangladesh announced that they intend to use their official currency as a means for bilateral trade either with the Rupee or Taka (Economic Times, 2023). Over the period, it is expected to roll out the role of the dollar (Mahmud, 2023). The strategic stroke on this initiative is also that with Bangladesh’s currency being perceived as generally weaker, the Indian Rupee will gain predominance in trade settlements. Thus, it will further deepen the economic cooperation between the two ‘natural enemies’. India and China, as ‘natural enemies’ also have immense economic interdependence. In 2022, there is an 8.4% in India-China trade volume, a rise from the last year, valued at 135.98 billion USD (Economic Times, 2023a).

Danda (Coercive diplomacy)

Kautilya in this policy recommends the use of force if necessary. In 1971, after a widespread genocide in erstwhile East Pakistan by the Pakistani troops, India militarily intervened to liberate the erstwhile East Pakistan and as a result the creation of Bangladesh had happened.

Bheda (Use of Espionage)

Kautilya suggests employing espionage to gain strategic advantages. Recently, India’s irritation and eventually Sri Lanka’s objection to the entry of China’s research ships into the Indian Ocean for the potential espionage factor is the example of ‘Bheda’.

Kautilya’s conceptualization of ‘Vijigishu’ and its strategizing ‘Mitras’

Kautilya provides the structural framework for conflict of interests or the friend-foe relationships in his ‘raja mandala’ theory. The theory is precisely a concept of geopolitics and diplomacy. The central kingdom or state referred to as ‘Vijigishu’ and the inter-state relations will be surrounded by the central kingdom. Kautilya firmly believes the approaches for dealing with friends and enemies and even with neutral states and bystanders depend on the concrete circumstances and correlation of the power. Kautilya offers a range of foreign policy options to ‘Vijigishu’ or the ruler of the central state, which is commonly referred to as ‘Shadgunya Niti’. The first two policy options are the two polarized: ‘Samdhi’ or Peace treaties and ‘Vigraha’ or war. India, after independence, has made efforts to sign the Peace and Friendship treatise with its neighbors. India has made also efforts to maintain peace with Pakistan several times. During PM Atal Behari Vajpayee, in 1999, a new bus was inaugurated from Delhi to Lahore to enhance

connectivity and normalize the relations between the two countries. However, in the same year, the Kargil war was started, in which India had no other options except to fight to defend herself.

In Kautilya's imperative of 'war', he entails that war inevitably leads to great human and material losses even for the victors and thus war should be the ultimate option for a country when all the other policies have failed to yield results (Roy, 2007). 'Vijigishu', literally means to have a victorious mindset despite facing obstacles. However, the expansionist nature of the Kautilyan state should be seen in the geo-historical context of the Indian subcontinent. Notably, in the Arthshastra, no expansionist policy was given beyond the Indian subcontinent. In terms of the militaristic view of Kautilya, he emphasized more on defense capabilities and barred the ruler of the central state from going unnecessarily for offensive measures. Unlike Sun Tzu and Clausewitz, Kautilya's idea is considered as the grand comprehensive strategy not the military strategy with the use of tactical warfare (Liebig, 2013). Kautilya's theorization of an intelligence network is the key instrument for the state to prevent conflict situations (Shoham & Liebig, 2016).

Among the other foreign policy options, 'Asana' or neutrality and 'Dvaidhibhava' or diplomatic double game seem to be very close sometimes in the realm of geopolitics. However, these two policies are very different from each other. India's reiteration of 'strategic autonomy' is a striking example of maintaining neutrality. India's continuation of the Non-aligned stance since the Cold War era with having the attitude of multi-alignment for the benefit of the country is the 21st-century style of Indian diplomacy. 'Dvaidhibha' or double game sometimes to seek strategic advantage out of the two rivalries. In South Asia, small countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh, and Maldives often use this policy with Sino-Indian rivalry so that they can get the best out of it. While one can think that this is synonymous with the 'Balance of power', this concept is more similar to the 'Balance of Threats'. Being small nations in South Asia, these countries often feel vulnerable towards larger countries like India and China, and thus they adopt this policy to balance one against another. The concept of 'Balance of Power' is more similar to Kautilya's idea of 'Samsraya' or alliance. Kautilya's ideas are identical to regional diplomacy rather than having a global appeal.

Eventually, the countries started to stress regional partnerships and trade negotiations in the era of 'multilateralism decaying' (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2006). Kautilya, in the ancient era,

also emphasized building regional allies or ‘mitras’. In ‘Mandala’ theory, he points out that the next to one’s immediate neighbors is the natural friend and has a strategic advantage of two-front monitoring the common enemy. Therefore, the utmost importance is to build and maintain regional partnerships, especially in the neighborhood region. The ‘Gujral doctrine’ of India was based on this principle of Kautilya. In that doctrine, while India advocated for ‘equal partnerships’ and ‘mutual respect’ with its neighbors, India would be the first responder whenever there was any crisis in its neighborhood without expecting any reciprocity (Sibal, 2019). This doctrine is based on the belief that India, as Kautilya’s ‘Vijigishu’, its power and stature are greatly linked to the nature of its ties with its neighbors. The other policy option is ‘Yana’ or preparing for war applies to the bilateral or trilateral military exercises of India. However, this policy has another interpretation. Although the Russia-Ukraine war started in 2022, almost since May 2021, there have been several satellite images, reports, and alerts that Russia was mobilizing its troops across the border of Ukraine. The former Chief Defence of Staff (CDS) of India, Bipin Rawat also expressed his deep concern over China’s building of villages across the Line of Actual Control, which is potentially a way to mobilize its troops, as per the reports (Sen, 2021; Pundir, 2021; Patranobis & Laskar, 2021).

Conclusion

Kautilya epitomizes the realism school of international thought but in a distinctive manner. Due to Eurocentrism, Kautilya has not been recognized yet as the proponent of the realist tradition in inter-state relations. While, Arthshastra has been largely recognized as the classic work on statecraft including economy and internal affairs, the diplomacy and military aspects of this book have been largely ignored for a long. Kautilya, if has to be placed as per the current intellectual tradition, must be standing as a pinnacle at the juncture of Political Science, Public administration, and international affairs. Kautilya’s legacy with his seminal work on ‘Arthashastra’ will be claiming the appropriate position in the non-Western IR theories. To free intellectual discourse from Western dominance, scholars from Asia, Africa, and other non-western parts need to study our ancient scriptures, which will eventually help to explore the rich tradition and extent of strategic thought in the non-western world much before the Western world.

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