

**Kautilya Today**  
(Speaking Notes)  
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It is customary on such occasions to say how delighted one is to come to a meeting and how appropriate its subject is. Today, for once, I mean it in full measure. I am truly delighted to be here at the workshop on Kautilya organised by the IDSA. I must congratulate Director Arvind Gupta on this initiative.

I have three reasons to be so delighted. You forced me to read Kautilya again, and that gave me great pleasure. Secondly, the conference enables us to reconnect with the rich Indian tradition of strategic thought. And thirdly, it could contribute to the evolution of our own strategic vocabulary and thought.

Let me expand on that.

### **1. On Reading Kautilya Again**

The *Arthashastra* meets one essential criterion for a great book. It bears reading again and again. Every time you read it you learn something new and find a new way of looking at events. But it is a very different sort of text from the *Bhagwad Gita*. This is not a book that you keep on your bedside table and turn to for daily inspiration. This is a serious manual on statecraft, on how to run a state, informed by a higher purpose (or *dharma*), clear and precise in its prescriptions, the result of practical experience of running a state. It is not just a normative text but a realist description of the art of running a state.

Reading the text again now, I was struck by how evidently Kautilya himself, (if indeed the author of the *Arthashastra* was one man and not a historical composite), is clearly the product of centuries of evolved strategic thinking. He cites several previous authorities differing views on many issues. Bharadvaja, Vishalaksha, Parasara, Pisuna and others are mentioned often. Kautilya argues with them, while presenting their views before his own. Sadly, what we know of many of them is limited to what Kautilya tells us.

Equally, Kautilya's is only one voice, and the *Arthashastra* is probably meant to be a normative text, describing how the state should work. Ashoka's imagining of the state's place in the world, judging by his inscriptions, and his practice do not bear out what the *Arthashastra* says. Other Indian texts have different points of view, for instance the Buddhist Nikaya texts, on statecraft

and defence. The Arthashastra and Kautilya are therefore one of several approaches to statecraft in Ancient India. It is also a text of its time and place, Mauryan to Gupta administration, and should be read as such.

I was also struck by the fact that Kautilya's is more than just a power maximisation or internal dominance strategy for a state. He has an almost modern sense of the higher purpose of the state, and of the limits of power.

## **2. Reconnecting with Indian Strategic Thought**

We are afflicted with neglect of our pre-modern histories, and many of us believe orientalist caricatures of India. India's supposedly incoherent strategic approach is actually a colonial construct, as is the idea of Indians somehow forgetting their own history and needing to be taught it by Westerners who retrieved it. The version that they "retrieved" was a construct that was useful to perpetuate colonial rule and, after independence, to induce self-doubt and a willingness to follow.

Reading Kautilya and the other indigenous texts is one way to give the lie to these theories.

The other is to consider strategic practice in India over the ages. One only has to think of the Mahabharata, (our own Warring States period slightly later), the histories of the Deccan, Kerala, and Bundelkhand in medieval times, (to pick a few examples at random), and what we have undergone in the sixty-five years since independence, to see continuity in Indian strategic practice. Fortunately younger Indian historians are now working on these subjects with unblinkered minds. I have just read a book by Jayashree Vivekanandan called *Interrogating International Relations* (Routledge, 2011) which analyses Mughal grand strategy. It strengthened my faith that our scholarly tradition is alive.

But as a general rule, today our theory has yet to catch up with our rich historical praxis.

Reading Kautilya (and other texts like the *Shantiparva* of the *Mahabharata*) one is reminded that this was not always so. One is also reminded of the rich experience in our tradition of multipolarity, of asymmetries in the distribution of power, of debate on the purposes of power (where *dharma* is defined), of the utility of force, and of several other issues with contemporary resonance. In many ways it is India's historical experience of poly-centric multi-state

systems, plurality, and of the omni-directional diplomacy and relativistic statecraft that it produced, that is closer to the world we see today. (In contrast, the single-sovereign, universalist, and hierarchical statecraft and diplomacy of traditional China is easier to explain and attractive in its simplicity but fundamentally different.)

Let me be clear. I am not trying to idealize the Indian past. There is a risk here that the analytic tradition becomes the historical tradition, that we confuse cause and effect, and that imageries become the reality that they were intended to reflect. All I am saying is that some of the problems in IR and strategic studies that we think we are dealing with for the first time have been considered by great minds in India before. We are the poorer for ignoring them. We can, instead, use the past to learn ways of thinking about these problems, improving our mental discipline, as it were.

Besides, states behave in ways that cannot be entirely explained by rational calculation or logic. (If they were they would be predictable.) Studying strategic traditions and cultures gives us a better understanding of why this is so. And where better to start than with oneself. A little self-awareness cannot hurt.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. When we in India call for a plural, inclusive and open security architecture in the Indo-Pacific we are well within a tradition and culture of thought which was relativistic, idea driven and omni-directional. Other traditions, which are more hierarchical, claiming universal validity, find these ideas hard to understand. (And we are shocked when they do not espouse what to us are our eminently sensible views!) Friends tell me that Chola, Pandyan and Oriya manuscripts and inscriptions are early examples of what the free flow of goods, ideas and people could achieve -- the ancient version of the open, inclusive architecture that we speak of today.

### **3. Creating our Own Modern Strategic Vocabulary**

Some of you will groan and say, "There he goes again on his hobby horse". But let me explain why this is important.

To be honest among ourselves, much of what passes for strategic thinking in India today is derivative, using concepts, doctrines and a vocabulary derived from other cultures, times, places and conditions. This is why, with a few

honorable exceptions like the home-grown nuclear doctrine, it fails to serve our needs, impact policy, or to find a place in domestic and international discourse.

Jawaharlal Nehru made a beginning towards creating modern Indian strategic thought. But his work was incomplete, even though it was taken forward and developed by others like K Subrahmaniam. Besides, the world has evolved rapidly since Nehru's time.

There is also no question that we live in a world that is different from Kautilya's in terms of technology and experience,. But human responses are still similar, as is the behaviour of the states that humans create and run. That is why reading Kautilya helps us by broadening our vision on issues of strategy.

It will, naturally, take time and practice for us to develop our own strategic vocabulary and doctrines. This will require patience, but must be done if India is to truly seek the broadest possible degree of strategic autonomy. After all autonomy begins in the mind. As I said earlier, fortunately the younger generation of Indian scholars shows signs of doing the necessary work and are thinking for themselves.

Strategic doctrines and cultures are not built in a day. I was, therefore, happy to see that this workshop is part of a broader Indigenous Historical Knowledge project by the IDSA. May I also suggest that this workshop be the first of a series that builds upon the beginning that you are making here? I assume that future workshops and work in the project on Indigenous Historical Knowledge will also cover other Indian thinkers and themes.

With these words, let me wish you and your workshop every success.