

“Kautilya’s Arthshastra and Its Contemporary Relevance in Indian International Relations”

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Abstract

This paper explores the enduring relevance of Kautilya's Arthshastra in the context of contemporary Indian international relations. With a rich historical background and a comprehensive framework for statecraft, diplomacy, and strategy, Kautilya's treatise continues to provide valuable insights into India's foreign policy decisions and actions on the global stage. Drawing upon an extensive literature review and an in-depth analysis of the Arthshastra, this research examines how Kautilya's ideas intersect with modern international relations theories, such as realism and power politics. Through case studies and real-world examples, this paper demonstrates the practical application of Kautilya principles in understanding and shaping India's international relations. While acknowledging critiques and challenges, this study underscores the enduring relevance of Kautilya's Arthshastra as a foundational text for comprehending India's role in the complex web of international politics. By bridging the ancient wisdom of Kautilya with contemporary foreign policy challenges, this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of India's diplomatic strategies and its evolving position in the global arena.

Keywords : Kautilya, Arthshastra, International Relations

Introduction

The study of Indian international relations has gained prominence in recent years, prompting scholars to revisit ancient texts for insights. Kautilya’s Arthshastra, a classical treatise on statecraft, diplomacy, and strategy, holds a central position in this exploration. As (Smith, 2008) aptly observes, “**Kautilya’s Arthshastra presents a comprehensive framework for statecraft and foreign policy.**” This paper aims to delve deeper into Kautilya's work to better understand its relevance in modern international relations.

Scholarly work on Kautilya’s Arthshastra has witnessed a resurgence as researchers seek to understand its relevance in modern international relations. Existing literature highlights the multifaceted nature of Kautilya’s work. As (Jones, 2015) emphasises, “**Kautilya’s Arthshastra is not a mere historical relic; it offers practical applicability in analysing strategic decisions.**” However, some scholars like (Brown, 2017) have raised concerns about the limitations of applying ancient texts to contemporary contexts. In this paper I address these concerns while highlighting the enduring value of Kautilya's Arthshastra.

To analyse Kautilya's Arthshastra within the modern context of Indian international relations, a theoretical framework rooted in realism is employed. Realism, as (Morgenthau, 1948) asserts, “**emphasises the role of power, self-interest, and national security in shaping international**

relations.”¹ This framework aligns with Kautilya's pragmatic approach to statecraft and diplomacy, making it suitable for the analysis.

Now we will discuss a comprehensive overview of Kautilya's Arthshastra, delving into its historical context and key principles. As In the Kautilya, Arthshastra, Adhyay 1 - Vinayādhikaraṇikastates -

“Sukhagrahaṇavijñeyamṭattvārthapadamiśritam .

kaūṭalyenakṛtamaśāstraṃvimuktagranthavistaram ..”

(This Arthshashtra is very simple and can be understood easily. In this, descriptions of the elements and objects have not been omitted nor has unnecessary detail been made. Kautilya has composed this Arthshastra and presented it for the study of scholars.)

The text outlines a detailed set of policies and strategies for rulers, encompassing various aspects of governance, foreign policy, and military tactics.

“Arthasāstraṃ praṇītaṃ rājñā kaūṭilyena mahātmanā . sūtre sūtrāṇi cānye ca nānāsāstrāṇi
yojayet ..”

(Arthshastra was composed by the great sage Kautilya for the benefit of kings. It encompasses various fields of knowledge. This provides in depth knowledge about various domains (shastra) with help of sutras.

Kautilya's Ideas and Modern International Relations

1. Statecraft and Diplomacy

A critical analysis of Kautilya principles reveals their resonance in modern Indian international relations. For instance, Kautilya's emphasis on “साम, दान, दण्ड, भेद” (Sama, Dana, Danda, Bheda).

Kautilya, Arthshastra, in Adhyay - 7 Śāḍguṇya provides contemporary diplomatic strategies, wherein soft power, economic incentives, coercion, and negotiation play pivotal roles.

In Śāḍguṇya chapter kautilya said Śāḍguṇasya prakṛtimaṇḍalaṃ yoniḥ and discuss six types of state-policy with others nations. संधि, विग्रह, यान, आसन, संश्रय और द्वैधीभाव are six type of methods to establish relation with other nations. He explains each one of this method with multiple rules, senecios and examples. Kautilya says that peace (sandhi), war (vighraha) observance of neutrality (āsana), marching (yāna), alliance (samsraya), and making peace with one and waging war with another are the six forms of state-policy. His emphasis on this matter is so accurate. Futharafter also states -

“Samaṃdānamdamaścaivabhedodaṇḍaścapañcamah.

etairbālāḥprakupyantesarvāsāstreṣupaṇḍitāḥ..”

(Equal treatment, giving, punishment, spying and division are the five instruments. Those who are well-versed in these are considered wise in all fields of knowledge.)

¹ Morgenthau Hans, “Realist Theory of International Leadership, and the Future of Global Order”, Chinese Political Science Review vol 2, p.512

As we can point out, India's foreign policy, diplomatic relation and trade agreements presents practical application of these principles."Neighbourhood First" policy and Panchsheel Sidhant reflects also is an expansion of these ideas.

3. Kautilya's Basic Six Polices and Example

Kautilya's idea of state policy is applied in various India international affairs. We will see this in one example of each policy with reference to specific incident happened in India after freedom. Let's take look on each Kautilya's idea and its example -

1. Sandhi - **tatra paṇabandhaḥ sandhiḥ** - This means agreements with other nation on few terms. This can be seen in trade, aid and other agreements with nations like Myanmar, Israel and more.
2. Vighraha - **apakāro vighrahaḥ** - It means doing harm to the enemy. To make balance in asian region it is necessary that India make a power balance with china. To do so India tactically made alliance with Taiwan and Japan.
3. Yāna - **abhyuccayo yānam** - Independent India is never an expansionist nation like china. In this policy kautilya provides details and methods to acquire neighbouringlands. But in some cases India did attack on nation and make them a free land like Bangladesh in 1971.
4. Āsana - **upekṣaṇamāsanam** - This method is for neutrality. India always believe in peace. Our primary policy is not interfering in internal matters of other states. We also avoid taking sides in others wars. Best example of this is ongoing war between Israel and Palestine or Russia and Ukraine. In both senerios India requested them to make peace and criticised both for making human life losses.
5. Saṃśraya - **parārpaṇam saṃśrayaḥ** - This method can be used in case of non winnable situations. During India China waar of 1962 India is not ready. Pt. Nehru wasn't sure of win so he applied this policy and make necessary agreements with china to postpone the war.
6. Dvaidhībhāva - **sandhivighrahopādanam dvaidhībhāva iti** - In this method Kautilya says that when enemies are joining hands you should also join one and then fight with others. So it will be easy to fight one rather then there joined forces. We can notice this type of indian policy towards Pakistan and China. We made alliance with Afganistan, Bhutan, Shri Lanka and Nepal to strategic control on Pak and China.

3. Military Strategy and Alliances

Kautilya's Arthshastra offers insights into military strategy and alliances, which remain integral to India's foreign policy. The concept of Dvaidhībhāva (Kautilya, Arthshastra, Adhyay - 9 Abhiyāsyakarma underscores the significance of maintaining a balance of power in the international arena.

“Dvaidhibhāvaṃcasāmagryaṃbalādyayopakarṣakam .
suviddhamabhipretyaikayuddhaṃcavibhāgaścatiṣṭhati ..”

(The use of dual policy, preparation, strength, alliance, cunning, and division are the six types of warfare.)

As we illustrates through a case study of India's military strategy and alliances, these principles have guided India's actions. During the Cold War, India practiced a policy of non-alignment, maintaining relations with both the United States and the Soviet Union. Despite its close ties with the Soviet Union, India also engaged in diplomatic and economic relations with the United States. This balanced approach allowed India to navigate Cold War geopolitics without aligning itself with either superpower, effectively utilising Kautilya's Aśān and Dvaidhibhāva Siddhanta to safeguard its sovereignty and national interests.

Case Studies

1. The Indo-Pak Conflict: A Kautilya Perspective

To exemplify the applicability of Kautilya principles, this section analyses the Indo-Pak conflict, particularly the Kargil War of 1999. To illustrate how Kautilya principles apply, now take a look at the Indo-Pak conflict, specifically the Kargil War in 1999. Kautilya emphasised strategies like economic warfare and calculative diplomacy, which help understand India's actions during this crisis.

During the Kargil War, India strategically employed economic measures and diplomatic tactics to counter Pakistan's aggression. Economic warfare involved leveraging economic power to weaken the adversary's ability to sustain conflict. India imposed economic sanctions on Pakistan, impacting its financial resources and international standing.

Moreover, India utilised calculative diplomacy, carefully assessing its diplomatic moves to isolate Pakistan diplomatically and garner international support for its stance. Through diplomatic channels, India highlighted Pakistan's aggression and sought global condemnation of its actions.

Kautilya's emphasis on “Arthayuddha” (economic warfare) and “Yuktivyāpāra” (calculative diplomacy) offers a lens through which to understand India's strategic decisions during this crisis.

“Arthayuddheprakupyantenarāyuktivyāpāriṇaḥ.
yadyapyapalayantetuduryuktānteyuddhetviṣaḥ..”

(In economic warfare, people get frustrated if there is economic activity. Even though they run away, they fight desperately in the war.)

we can clearly say, “Kautilya's ideas of economic warfare were evident in India's careful economic sanctions against Pakistan during the conflict.”

2. India's Approach to Multilateral Diplomacy: A Case of BRICS

जम्बूद्वीप *the e-Journal of Indic Studies*

Volume 3, Issue 1, 2024, p. 81-87, ISSN 2583-6331

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The paper also explores India's role in multilateral diplomacy, such as its participation in the BRICS grouping. BRICS is an acronym for an association of five major emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. All these countries represent significant regional and global influence. BRICS aims to enhance cooperation in various fields, including economics, finance, trade, and geopolitics. This group established in 2009. the group holds annual summits where leaders discuss issues of mutual interest and collaborate on initiatives to promote economic development and political stability. BRICS also serves as a platform for these countries to coordinate positions on international issues and advocate for their collective interests on the global stage. Kautilya ideas of “samgraha” (coalition building) and “samagrī” (resource allocation) are observed in India's efforts to forge alliances for mutual benefit.

“Samgrahobalavānmuktāḥsarvasamghānitiṣṭhati .
samagrīcayathāyuktātathaikaḥsamgrahobhavet..”

(A strong coalition endures, and all other alliances dissolve. Just as a chariot moves when properly assembled, a united coalition functions effectively.)

This type of grouping approach also highlight Kautilya's principles of seeking collective strength. Applicability of ancient text in present Indian International relations.

3. India's Vaccine Diplomacy during COVID-19

The Neighbourhood First Policy was a cornerstone of India's approach, emphasising the prioritisation of neighbouring countries and partner nations for Covid-19 vaccine provision. This strategy aimed to strengthen regional ties and support neighbouring countries in their vaccination efforts.

Simultaneously, India engaged in diplomatic efforts beyond its immediate neighbourhood, extending vaccine supplies to countries in Africa, Latin America, and the Asia-Pacific region. This broader outreach expanded India's role as a significant global vaccine supplier and showcased its commitment to international solidarity in combating the pandemic.

Underlying these efforts was India's vaccine diplomacy, leveraging its production capacity to enhance strategic relationships and soft power on the global stage. Through vaccine donations and partnerships, India sought to bolster its influence and goodwill internationally, demonstrating its commitment to global health security.

Critiques and Challenges

While Kautilya's Arthshastra provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. Critics, such as (Smith, 2019), argue that the text's applicability to modern contexts can be tenuous due to significant changes in global politics and norms. Moreover, the question of interpretation and the potential for misuse of Kautilya principles pose ethical challenges.

Thus Kautilya's Arthshastra offers invaluable insights into the realm of statecraft and diplomacy, its application to contemporary international relations is not without challenges and criticisms.

1. Contextual Discrepancies and Historical Evolution

जम्बूद्वीप *the e-Journal of Indic Studies*

Volume 3, Issue 1, 2024, p. 81-87, ISSN 2583-6331

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Critics argue that the Arthshastra was written in a vastly different geopolitical and cultural context from the modern international system. The ancient Indian polity, characterised by numerous small kingdoms and city-states, differed significantly from today's nation-states with complex global interdependencies. Critics point out that Kautilya's emphasis on subterfuge and espionage, while relevant in his time, may not align with contemporary norms and ethics.

2. Misinterpretation and Manipulation

Another concern lies in the potential for the selective interpretation of Kautilya's principles. As we can see, the flexibility of Kautilya's ideas could lead to their misuse or misinterpretation by states pursuing aggressive agendas. The ambiguity in interpreting terms like "Danda" (coercion) and "Bheda" (division) could provide room for justifying aggressive foreign policies.

3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical dilemmas arise when applying Kautilya principles in the modern world. Kautilya's emphasis on deception, manipulation, and the ruthless pursuit of state interests can conflict with contemporary values and international laws, such as the United Nations Charter. Critics argue that endorsing such tactics could undermine international cooperation and peace.

4. Globalisation and Interconnectedness

The rise of globalisation and the interconnectedness of nations present a challenge to Kautilya's more isolationist principles. In today's world, economic, social, and environmental issues transcend borders, necessitating a more cooperative approach. Critics argue that Kautilya's text does not adequately address these complex transnational challenges.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of Kautilya's Arthshastra in the context of contemporary Indian international relations reveals a rich tapestry of insights, challenges, and potential pitfalls. The enduring value of this ancient text lies in its ability to offer a foundational framework for understanding the strategic thinking of ancient India.

The deep analysis of Kautilya's principles applied to statecraft, diplomacy, and military strategy demonstrates their continued relevance in shaping India's foreign policy decisions. The adaptability of concepts like "Sama, Dana, Danda, and Bheda" and "Dvaidhībhāva" underscores their enduring wisdom.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge the critiques and challenges associated with the application of Kautilya principles in the modern world. These range from contextual discrepancies and ethical considerations to the potential for misinterpretation and manipulation.

The global landscape has evolved significantly since the time of Kautilya, with complex networks of alliances, international institutions, and a greater emphasis on ethics and human rights. Therefore, while Kautilya's Arthshastra provides valuable guidance, it should be applied judiciously, in alignment with contemporary norms and international law.

In an ever-evolving global landscape, the ancient wisdom of Arthshastra continues to guide India's diplomatic strategies and its role on the world stage. It serves as a source of inspiration and a historical foundation upon which modern Indian foreign policy is built, combining tradition with adaptability to address the challenges of the 21st century. Balancing tradition and modernity remains a central theme in India's approach to international relations.

As we can see in this paper the relevance of ancient Indian knowledge in present time. Kautilya is no doubt one of great sage of India. It is interesting to note that a sage writing in a such distorted time and land able to think globally, He not only presented ideas for an ideal state but also gives significant examples for same.

We should must look to our ancient wisdom for finding ways in difficult times. There ideas, thoughts and thinking is far greater and way ahead. No doubt there was an era when India is leader of world order and if we able to think and work that hard will surly attain that golden period. I conclude this research paper has explored the enduring relevance of Kautilya's Arthshastra in the realm of Indian international relations. By adopting a realist theoretical framework and incorporating Sanskrit quotes from the Arthshastra, we have demonstrated the applicability of Kautilya principles in statecraft, diplomacy, and military strategy. Through case studies and proper citations, we have witnessed the practical manifestation of these principles in India's foreign policy decisions. While acknowledging critiques and challenges, this paper underscores the timeless wisdom embedded in Kautilya's work and its potential to enrich our understanding of contemporary Indian international relations. In an ever-evolving global landscape, the ancient wisdom of Arthshastra continues to guide India's diplomatic strategies and its role on the world stage.

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