



# ISSUE BRIEF

No. 189

August 2019

## Military History and Lessons for Strategic Planning in the Indian Context



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*“Study history, study history. In history lie all the secrets of statecraft”*

— Winston Churchill

### Introduction

The study of history is vital to understand the present and prepare for the future. To that extent, quite beyond the vicarious experience of battlefield, the study of military history affords an understanding of the interplay of forces and provides the scholar-warrior means of viewing current problems against the historical perspective of how men have handled similar problems in the past. To the strategic planner the study of history enables to distinguish the transient from the enduring, isolate things that need thinking about, facilitates better understanding of the structure of policy problems and offers insight to discern inappropriate historical analogies and illustrations as and when they are offered.

The complexity of strategy is such that achieving a satisfactory end state at reasonable cost and within a reasonable time frame, is often elusive.

### Key Points

1. The article analyses the traditional Indian Strategic Culture, drawing lessons from Arthashastra for recommending a way forward for comprehensive projection of national power.
2. The key relationship within strategy is that between military force and the policy objective.
3. Historically the Indians did most of their fighting within India, only rarely undertaking military ventures outside the subcontinent.
4. India's strategic planning has to be focused on the Domestic, Regional, Continental and Systematic challenges.
5. India needs a coherent National Security Strategy that provides a framework for all our security policies.

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi, is an independent think-tank dealing with national security and conceptual aspects of land warfare, including conventional and sub-conventional conflict and terrorism. CLAWS conducts research that is futuristic in outlook and policy-oriented in approach.

## Military History and Lessons for Strategic ...

Since war has remained a constant feature in man's existence, history books are replete with accounts of conflict and lessons to be drawn.

The article endeavours to analyse the traditional Indian strategic culture, draws lessons from the epic 'Arthashastra' to recommend a way forward for comprehensive projection of national power.

### Strategy and History

The strategic process is all about how (concept or way) leadership will use the power (resources or means) available to the state to exercise control over sets of circumstances and geographic locations to achieve objectives (ends) in accordance with the state policy. Strategy provides the direction for the coercive or persuasive use of this power to achieve specified objectives. The direction is by nature proactive, but it is not predictive. Strategy assumes that while the future cannot be predicted, the strategic environment can be studied, assessed and to varying degrees anticipated and manipulated. Only with proper analysis can trends, issues, opportunities and threats be identified, influenced and shaped as to how the state chooses to do or not to do its business.

The key relationship within strategy is that between military force and the policy objective. The relationship is a complex one. While military must serve policy, it is not simply a case of political leadership demanding whatever it desires from their military commanders. It is imperative on both the military and political leadership that they discuss what is required and, just as importantly, what is possible. This relationship is at its most complex manifestation in a modern democratic state, where the political leadership may have little understanding of the military instrument and may be more concerned with the domestic political environment. Likewise, the military may have little understanding of the political world. This is where military history comes to the immediate rescue. A leader elected through democratic process can enhance his skills of military decision making by consciously

looking into the history of warfare and superimposing the learning's of yesterday for the battles of tomorrow. It may still be argued that for strategy, upon which wars are won and lost, there are no formulae for success, however theory can educate the mind of the strategist and lessons can be learnt from the vast array of historical experiences.

### India's Strategic Culture

Traditionally India's political-military history does not provide the cohesive element that its culture does. In the first place, Indians did most of their fighting within India, only rarely undertaking military ventures outside the subcontinent and these too, were often defensive in nature. The foreign incursions into India through the Northwest passes were also rarely stopped or defeated. As a result, Indian forces were compelled to fight on the defensive, on Indian soil, after the invader had already gained access to the rich North Indian plain. Over the millennia certain major factors that shaped Indian strategic thinking are:

- **Geography.** Geography has had a profound impact on our historical and cultural aspects. Firstly, the strategic location, size, population and the natural barriers resulted in a belief among the people of their relative standing in the world. Secondly, the barriers made the people insular and inward-looking over most of history with little interest in matters beyond the subcontinent, apart from trade.
- **Religion.** The growth of Hinduism, with its sophisticated thoughts, wide appeal and pervasiveness enabled it to absorb and synthesise all types of religious and cultural influences of the numerous invaders to bring about a feeling of 'Indianness' based on a cultural identity.
- **Eternal Life.** The Indian belief in life cycles and repetitions takes a very complex view of life in which logic is only one of the many influences of concern. This makes them seem realistic and pragmatic but also passive and fatalistic which

impedes preparation for the future in all aspects of life including the strategic.

- **The British Rule.** The British colonisation of India had some very diverse consequences. Firstly, their emphasis on technology, infrastructure and modern administrative and legal processes led to the rise of India as a modern political nation state. Secondly, since India became the mother base for the British domination of the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific, it provided them the manpower to raise a modern army that became an effective instrument for the control of the region and the subcontinent. All of this resulted in a dynamic security strategy aimed at the defence of India and in maintaining the status quo in the region.

Post-independence the evolution of Indian strategic planning can be broadly divided into four distinct phases:

- The first phase that continued till the end of the Sino-Indian conflict was shaped by Prime Minister Nehru and others who had faced colonial and imperial domination and went on to reject capitalism as a model of development and opted instead for a mixed economy dominated by the state. In the idealistic belief that the principles of 'Panchsheel' would dominate inter-state relations, non-alignment was developed as a strategic doctrine.
- The second phase lasted from the mid-1960s till the early 1990s and the break-up of the Soviet Union saw a focus on the strengthening of the armed forces and the building of capability to be able to deter another Chinese aggression while simultaneously enhancing capability to neutralise Pakistan by offensive action. The decisive campaign that led to the creation of Bangladesh gave the political leadership self-confidence in India's ability to achieve its aims despite blatant superpower posturing and coercion.
- The third phase could be considered to be the period of the 1990s from the time of Soviet

disintegration to the end of the Kargil conflict by which time an effective and operationalised nuclear weapons programme was being put in place. While the demise of the Soviet Union left India seemingly unprotected from great power counterbalance in its sphere of influence, it was the shock of the balance of payments crisis in 1991 that left the country feeling vulnerable and isolated. It forced India to revisit its policy of non-alignment and also to reconsider the viability of its socialistic economic developmental model. The increasing menace of Islamic fundamentalism and deterioration within Kashmir forced the emphasis to shift towards stabilising the internal situation with little resources, capability or interest in playing the role of a benign big brother in the region.

- The fourth phase, post-Kargil, saw the internal situation stabilising and the economy growing. The attention refocused on regional interests and global aspirations. Along with establishing a nuclear weapons capability, India categorically declared a 'no first use' nuclear policy that has continued to be the mainstay of our nuclear strategy. With its renewed diplomatic initiatives post-2014, India is now ready to play its role as an emerging regional and a world power.

### Future Strategic Planning

In the recent past, India has been paying attention to global common issues, partly as a good citizen in world affairs and partly out of regard for its own security. However, the stakes have been raised since the end of the Cold War with the disappearance of the central strategic conflict between the Western and Eastern blocs and with the development of a more integrated world economy, the global commons now draw greater attention.

India's strategic planning has to be focused on the domestic, regional, continental (Asian) and systematic challenges. Domestically, India's security is threatened primarily by Insurgencies, Separatist violence, Terrorism

and Communalism. At the Regional level, the greatest threat to India are China and Pakistan. Both are military threats at the Nuclear, Conventional and Sub-conventional levels. At the level of international system, India must keep an eye on China and the US. China

*Indians have not been great strategic thinkers or developers of strategy, although they have been profound thinkers in many other fields.*

– George K Tanham

is not just an Asian power any longer. Its moves in Africa and Latin America and its massive economy, hard currency reserves, manufacturing bases, and emerging technological capabilities suggest that it will be a superpower with the ability to project hard power beyond Asia and to exercise influence globally in near future. The US will, however, remain the greatest power in the system for perhaps another two decades.

Even as India grapples with diverse external and internal threats to its security, many new challenges are emerging on the security horizon. Before the dangers evident in them can be addressed, the emerging threats need to be identified and understood. The major emerging threats are outlined below:

- Increasing demand for power and oil to meet the requirements of industry and the growing population will make energy security a primary concern.
- India's growing population and the likelihood of mass migrations into India, for example from Bangladesh, will threaten the existing food reserves and endanger food security.
- The ravages of global warming and changing monsoon patterns are likely to deplete India's water sources and threaten water security even as the increasing population, rapid industrialisation and the enhanced requirements of irrigation raise the demand for water.
- Information warfare is another emerging threat through which, besides nation-states, non-state

actors, individual terrorists and even disgruntled elements within a state can play havoc with a nation's telecom, banking, stock exchanges, power grids, railways and air traffic control infrastructure, besides military communications and networks.

- The threats to India's maritime security are increasing exponentially as the world turns more and more towards the exploitation of ocean resources for food, energy and raw materials. This long-neglected aspect needs to be incorporated in the management of national security so that India's ocean resources in its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) are not poached at will by any other state and non-state actors.
- Security of the environment is another emerging challenge. The continuing increase in the population will threaten the already depleted forest resources as the area of cultivable land comes under pressure. Also, over exploitation of the oceans may upset the delicate marine balance.
- In future, the Indian government will have to increasingly plan for the security concerns of the vast Indian Diaspora, particularly the migrant Indian population employed on temporary work permits in the Gulf countries. The Gulf War in 1990-91 had resulted in the most massive airlift since the Berlin airlift as over 100,000 Indian workforce personnel had to be evacuated from Iraq.<sup>1</sup>

### Strategic Lessons: The Arthashastra

The Indian subcontinent is a unique land mass having a long history of invasion, political indifference, deceit and exemplary rulers. Today's scholars, politicians and policymakers are hardwired to evaluate security policy through heuristics, the most common being historical analogy. Historical analogy not only provides context and orientation to the problems at hand but it also allows leaders to elucidate the range of potential policy options and outcomes available and offers comfort by broadcasting that the threat of the day is not without precedence.

Kautilya's work, the Arthashastra, is filled with maxims that have over the millennia become part of our everyday life. Saam (conciliation or treaty), Daam (reward or money), Dand (retribution) and Bhed (dissension), for instance, are still used extensively as instruments of state policy, across nations. The beauty of this treatise lies in the fact that theories visualised some 2,500 years ago remain not only uniquely fresh but astonishingly relevant. The six methods of statecraft called Shadgunyam as enunciated in the epic, explicitly more outward-looking, are **Sandhi** (Peace), **Vigraha** (War), **Asana** (Waiting for the enemy to strike the first blow), **Yana** (Attack), **Samsharya** (Alliance) and **Dvaidibhava** (Duplicity).<sup>3</sup>

- **Sandhi.** The policy of Sandhi is based on the rule that a state when faced with a more powerful adversary, must try to negotiate a peaceful pact in order to survive. The same can be better understood in the context of several historical peace treaties between nations to include the one between India and China.
- **Vigraha.** Includes both the open and covert wars. Kautilya's views were, as he said, "Wage an open war even at considerable loss in men and material (but) destruction of the enemy is the goal."
- **Asana.** The policy of Asana can be described as maintaining neutrality or restraint and is considered a practical option only for a strong state as, generally, a weak state would be unable to maintain a neutral position. This is akin to Indian policy of 'Non-Alignment' and also Indian response to the 2001-2002 border stand-off with our western adversary.
- **Yana.** The policy of Yana takes into consideration that when the constituent elements of a state which include the treasury, army and allies are on the rise, the state should augment and mobilise its resources to prepare for a war. India's role during the 1971 war against Pakistan in training of Mukti Bahini is an example.

- **Samsharya.** Alliance or seeking support is often put to use by states by allying with stronger in order to bolster their strength and increase manoeuvring space. India's historical agreement with the Soviet Union and more recently with the US and Japan are examples.
- **Dvaidibhava.** Dual policy is for a nation of moderate strength. It is resorting to peace and war at the same time. India's policy of improving its relations with China while simultaneously building its armed forces is a good example.<sup>2</sup>

### Way Ahead

Asia is fast emerging as the geopolitical and economic pivot of the world. It is now widely accepted that the twenty-first century will witness the consolidation of economic, political and technological power of Asian states. India as a key Asian nation has the potential to project comprehensive power in the region and help foster stable environment around its periphery with a well-crafted Grand Strategy. Certain recommendations, in the Indian context, are discussed in succeeding paras.

**Coherent National Security Strategy (NSS).** India needs a coherent National Security Strategy that provides a framework for all our security policies, including those that use both hard and soft power assets. The NSS must strike an appropriate balance between commitments and resources, between alliances and regional relationships and between military and non-military assets.

**Statecraft is as important as State Power.** India's past wars with its neighbours have demonstrated that it is critically important not to assume that the basic principles of a strategy can be applied with a complacent assumption that what has worked in one case will necessarily work in another. Prudent decision making must include constant and vigorous diplomacy leading to independent political and military assessments.

**Demand and Allow Longer Term Perspectives.** It is important for the government to develop policies

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that are designed for long term, beyond the five-year electoral cycle, and not just as a reaction to crises, whether foreseen or unexpected.

**Strengthening of Linkages.** The linkages between historians, users of military history, strategy and historical analysis are simply too weak, the end result is that politicians, policymakers, military planners and intelligence analysts are not properly educated to deal with the broader realities of war and optimal use of military forces, these need to be strengthened by establishing an agency to analyse major aspects of strategic and higher defence policy with historical context.

**Cross Domain Knowledge.** If the strategy is wrong, the skill of the general, valour of the soldier and the brilliance of victory, however decisive, fail to make an impact. Therefore, people in the decision-making capacity, must take into consideration critical national security issues, including historical, political, diplomatic and economic dimensions while making recommendations to the political leadership.

### Notes

1. David J. Lonsdale, *Alexander the Great, Lessons in Strategy*.
2. Brig Deepak Sinha, *India's National Security Strategy & Military Doctrine*.
3. Gurmeet Kanwal, *India's National Security Strategy in a Nuclear Environment*.
4. Kanti Bajpai, *India's Grand Strategy – History, Theory and Cases*.

**Shaping Behaviour.** We need to avoid confusing the end of major battles, or achievement of some kind of ceasefire or treaty, with shaping a successful grand strategic outcome, like in the case of our western adversary. History has taught us that a given war ends only when the outcome ceases to be the dominant factor shaping behaviour, not with the end of fighting.

**Scientific Research.** Military history should be treated as a field of scientific research and not as a sentimental treasure.

### Conclusion

The much-lamented absence of carefully articulated, meticulously executed grand strategic thought in Indian context may, in fact, be consistent with our own traditional political ethics. However we need to learn to re-examine military history in ways that will help us understand the world more coherently. We need the right kind of military history to remind us that hubris is followed by nemesis. The requirement is to remember the critical aspects of the past to learn from them to shape the right future.

*The contents of this Issue Brief are based on the analysis of material accessed from open sources and are the personal views of the author. It may not be quoted as representing the views or policy of the Government of India or Integrated Headquarters of MoD (Army).*



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