Sun Zi and Kautilya: Towards a Comparative Analysis
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Opening: Pawn to King Four

Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles, you will never be defeated. When you are ignorant of the enemy but know yourself, your chances of winning or losing are equal, if ignorant both of your enemy and of yourself, you are sure to be defeated in every battle.¹

*Art of War*, Chapter 3

Of all those in the army close to the commander, none is more intimate than the spies; of all matters, none is more confidential than those relating to spy operations. He who is not sage and wise, humane and just, cannot use spies. And he who is not delicate and subtle, cannot get the truth out of them.²

*Art of War*, Chapter 13

The power of counsel is superior (to sheer might and energy). For, the king with the eyes of intelligence and science (of politics) is able to take counsel with a small effort and to over reach his enemy possessed of energy and might by conciliation and other means and by secret and occult practices.³

*Arthasastra*, Book 9, Chapter 1

A king shall have his agents in the courts of the Enemy, the Ally, the Middle and Neutral kings to spy on the kings as well as their eighteen types of high officials.⁴

*Arthasastra*, Book 1, Chapter 12

It may be stated at the outset that this essay is essentially an attempt to identify some critical commonalities in the approaches of Sun Zi and Kautilya, the two profound strategists of the ancient Orient, one belonging to China and the other to India, and who exercised considerable influence for centuries that followed in their respective countries. The common view is that Sun Zi was a quintessential military strategist, and Kautilya was a master of the science of politics or *Arthasastra*. What we seek to highlight in this essay is the proposition that both personages had a lot in common and took a holistic view of the affairs of the state. It is clear from a reading of Sun Zi’s *Art of War* that he assigned a cardinal place to politics, both internal and external. Equally true, but much less understood, is the fact that Kautilya was no less concerned with strategies of war, although he has often been cited, quoted, and referenced in the context of management of state structure and, to some extent, foreign policy.

Dr. K.N. Ramachandran was Research Associate at IDSA from November 1973 to September 1999. This contribution was first published as an IDSA Occasional Paper in 1999.
Sun Zi is pithy and epigrammatic and each principle of his could be expanded into a detailed statement. On the other hand, Kautilya is meticulous in his details and has woven a tapestry of thoughts. Sun Zi’s work has the disciplined elegance of Chinese calligraphy, while Kautilya’s treatise has the solid details of a sculpted frieze in a magnificent temple. Sun Zi was a thinking general—if one were to go by traditional accounts—who knew the multi-faceted compulsions of a state, while Kautilya was an all pervasive strategist of state who knew the components and compulsions of war. In the subsequent sections, we will seek to highlight the similarities in the approaches of these two great personages and their specific points of agreement on issues of war and peace.

Dating of Sun Zi and Kautilya

There has been a controversy in academic circles regarding the dating of Sun Zi’s time and that of his work. In fact, some scholars have even questioned the very authorship of the Art of War and have argued that 13 chapters of his treatise were attributed to him at a later time. This is not exceptional because scholars have questioned the dating of many Chinese literary works of the “Classical Period” extending from 551 to 249 B.C. This phase constituted a vital part of what is known as the Spring and Autumn Period (772–481 B.C.) Thus, the Classical Period in literature overlaps the Spring and Autumn dynastic period. The grand historical and literary work Shi Ji has recorded that Sun Zi lived around 500 B.C. and logically the treatise was composed during that period when Sun Zi was in the service of the king of Wu.5 On the other hand, conclusions arrived at after studying literary sources and military developments in ancient China, place the work around 400 B.C., that is, 100 years later, during the Warring States period (403–221 B.C.) An eminent military historian, Samuel B. Griffith who has examined the various arguments, including those of the historians of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has advanced the view that the authorship of the Art of War is “unsettled”. But he does agree that “the originality, the consistent style and thematic development” suggest that the treatise is not a “compilation but was written by a singularly imaginative individual who had considerable practical experience in war”.6 According to yet another scholar, who has produced a new translation of the classic, Sun Zi really existed and he “not only served as a strategist and possibly general and also composed the core of the book that bears his name. Thereafter, the essential teachings were transmitted within the family or close-knit school of disciples, being improved and revised with the passing decades… The early text may even have been edited by his famous descendant, Sun Bin, who also extensively employed its teachings in his own Military Methods and simultaneously made the Sun name even more glorious”. He has also suggested that Sun Bin’s work is a development of Sun Zi’s treatise in practical terms and hence the two works taken together constitute a coherent whole.7 Moreover, the bamboo slips excavated from the Yinxu Mountains in China provide a version of Sun Zi’s treatise which is somewhat different from the commonly accepted text. These slips belong to the early Han Dynasty that is, three and half centuries after Sun Zi’s period. But these slips confirm Sun’s authorship. An expert has opined that differences could be owing to the fact that the “work has been revised with new ideas added to it by various generals throughout Chinese history”.8 This does not in any manner cast a shadow on the essence of Sun Zi’s teachings. He remained the foundation on which later strategists elaborated.

As regards the treatise itself, It was in circulation in 400 B.C. and down the centuries it was either published in part or commented upon. During the Liang Dynasty (in the 6th Century A.D.), at least two editions of his works appeared and in the Tang period (618–905 A.D.), his work formed a part of Tong Tian, a comprehensive encyclopaedia. In the Song Dynasty (960–1126 A.D.), China’s Seven Military Classics were compiled in a methodical fashion and in this compendium the Art of War occupied the pride of place. More accurate editions of Sun Zi’s work came to be produced in subsequent centuries but it is the Manchu Dynasty (1644–1911 AD.) edition, brought out by the eminent scholar Song Xingyan, that is considered a standard work on the subject. However, it needs to be noted that translations of his work into foreign languages began to appear since the middle of the 18th century when a French cleric produced a summary of the treatise for the first time.9

It is equally significant to note that like Sun Zi, there is very little that is known about Kautilya the person. According to some accounts, he was a Brahmin from South India while some others
believe that he was a Brahmin from Taxila (now in Pakistan), a famous centre of learning in ancient times. The Buddhist tradition refers to his profound knowledge of scriptures and his competence in intrigue, policy-formulation, and strategy. The Nitisastra of Kandama had observed that the wise Vishnugupta who with Chandragupta ended the tyrannical rule of the Nandas, “extracted the nectar Nitisastra from the ocean of Arthasastra works”. Dandin, yet another ancient scholar, had referred to Dandaniti of Acharya Vishnugupta in his work Dasakumaracharita. Since Vishnugupta and Chanakya are mentioned in this work rather than Kautilya, some have argued that Kautilya could be a different person. However, Prof. Kangle is of the view that in the ancient tradition, all the “three names belong to the same individual”. In the light of these and other evidence, Prof. Kangle has concluded that “at least from the fifth or sixth century A.D. onwards, the present work is believed to have been composed by Kautilya, also known as Chanakya, and Vishnugupta who was instrumental in overthrowing the Nandas and placing Chandragupta Maurya on the throne” around 321 B.C. and, hence, the date of the work may be placed as at the end of the 4th century B.C.11 This view is basically endorsed by J.F. Fleet, H. Jacobi, J.J. Meyer and others. It has been contested by J. Jolly-Wintervitz, A.B. Keith and O. Stein among other scholars. The counter arguments have also been contested by scholars such as K.P. Jaiswal, D.R. Bhandarkar, D.D. Kosambi, V.R. Ramaehandra, Dikshitar and K.A. Nilakanta Sastri.12

Among the arguments against the traditional evaluation, some of them need to be noted, because similar arguments have been made about Sun Zi. According to Prof. D.D. Kosambi, the total actual text, calculated on the basis of 32 letters to a sloka, comes to only 4,800 slokas, although it has been stated in the first chapter of the work that it has 150 chapters with 6,000 slokas. This difference had arisen, according to Kosambi, “because the original text had leaked away over the centuries”. Thus, in his view, the existing text is somewhat incomplete.13 Yet another view, articulated by A.B. Keith, is that Kautilya founded a school, and that the present text is not Kautilya’s “own work but the product of this school based on Kautilya’s teaching though not by his own hand”.14 Hillebrandt expressed somewhat similar views from a different perspective and came to the conclusion that that “the book is the work of his juniors, among whom his thoughts and expressions were continuously retained and brought forth by name in contrast with other teachers’ views or as a redaction made by them of an old text from his hand”. Further, Prof. T.R. Trautmann, who has made a study of the Arthasastra (1988) is of the view that although it was formulated by “a single person, has no one creator”. And in Prof. Trautman’s view, Chanakya did not have a name called Kautilya. Some have even said that Vishnugupta is also not a name of Kautilya. In sum, there are controversies about Chanakya or Kautilya and his work also. However, Prof. R.P. Kangle, whose work was published before Trautmann’s thesis but which has taken into account similar arguments, has concluded by citing H. Jacobi to the effect that in the absence of solid evidence, “one must not push aside the unanimous Indian tradition” that it is the work of Kautilya who helped Chandragupta to come to power in Magadh.

Lastly, while Kangle has argued in a detailed fashion that the work belongs to 300 B.C., there are other like R.G. Bhandarkar who place it at the 1st or 2nd century A.D., while H. Raychaudhuri is of the view that the treatise could be assigned to the period 249 B.C. to 100 A.D. According to the conclusions of a workshop organised by the Indian Council of Historical Research, Arthasastra was a compilation made by a scholar, Kautilya, in 150 A.D. It is significant to note that while there were references to the treatise in subsequent literary and other works, the full text was not available, it was only in 1904 that the palm leaf text in the grantha script came to Dr. Shyamasastri of Mysore, who published it in 1909 and produced an English version in 1915. This has been re-issued since then. Two German editions, one in one part (1926), and the other in six parts (1925-26), by J. Jolly and J.J. Meyer, respectively, came be published. Prof. R.P. Kangle’s three-volume edition was published in the Sixties. A modern version edited by L.N. Rangarajan was published in 1992. The book has been translated into various Indian languages and some other foreign languages.

In sum, notwithstanding dating controversies about the works of Sun Zi and Kautilya, their works are outstanding classics that deal with the issues of war and peace in both strategic and practical terms. In the subsequent sections, we propose to delineate how the thinkers in the two cultures arrived at similar conclusions on issues that are vital to the interests of any state.
Anatomy of Power

In both Kautilyan and Sun Zi systems, power is not an autonomous entity but an interrelated whole comprising several modules. These have to mesh harmoniously to produce what one may describe as integrated strength that will arbiter the consequences of the hegemon’s plans and blueprints. A Kautilyan power table as gleaned from his treatise may be drawn as follows (Tables 4.1 and 4.2).

Table 4.1. Power Table A.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POWER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COUNSEL (EVALUATION)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRITICAL IMPORTANCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTELLIGENCE KNOWLEDGE OF POLITICS FOREIGN POLICY</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Derived by the author.

Table 4.2. Power Table B.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POWER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KNOWLEDGE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRITICAL IMPORTANCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTELLIGENCE DIPLOMACY</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Derived by the author.
In Kautilya’s view, a king (state) who is superior in these interrelated aspects of power, will outmanoeuvre the opponent with “little effort” by using four methods: conciliation: sowing discontents: tricks, strategems, clandestine operations; and occult means. 

Sun Zi’s system is similar to the Kautilyan structure (Table 4.2). 

Sun Zi has attached primary importance to defeating the enemy’s strategy, followed by diplomacy to break his alliances, before actually using the army. In other words, “knowledge” of the adversary’s thinking and plans enables a more effective use of power which is agumented by destroying his alliance systems. Moreover, Sun Zi also believed that the economics of war has both short-term and long-term implications for the welfare of the king (state). Finally, what the Chinese refer to as Ch’i is the individual and collective psychological condition to promote the cause of victory. These basic structures have other sub-classifications and variables but the point is that both Kautilya and Sun Zi formulated their power tables in an amazingly similar fashion. These basic power tables are valid even in the contemporary context of war and peace, in particular, and safeguarding of national security, in general.

Planning and Preparedness: The Key

Both Sun Zi and Kautilya laid considerable stress on the objective evaluation of geographical factors, estimating the strength of the enemy and his allies and every other input from economic to social to military conditions in the enemy state and the actual employable resources—human and material—of the hegemon of conqueror. Sun Zi put it with an extraordinary precision: “Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be defeated”. 22

He also noted five important points that the hegemon has to grasp before launching a war. These are: (A) He should know when he can fight, that is, precise timing of the launch of operations. (B) He should have a thorough understanding of the nature of terrain, and the types of ground. (C) He should adopt matching strategies and tactics in accordance with the strength of the antagonistic forces. (D) His army leadership and ranks should be united with a sense of mission. (E) After preparations, he should lie in wait for the enemy. (F) His generals should be able, and should not be interfered with. 23

The four points noted above—A, B, C and D—emphasise the pre-requisite of grasping the correlation of the forces of the enemy by the hegemon understanding battlefield conditions and forging seamless solidarity among his own generals and ranks. Lastly, the question of the hegemon not interfering with the task of the generals once a decision has been taken He stated: “All expeditions should be of short duration in conformity with the lightness of the undertaking or of longer duration, in conformity with the heaviness of the undertaking”. 26 Surely, this conceptual statement, in the process of implementation, must take into account both material and other resources of the state, whether the campaign is short or long.

Sun Zi’s ideas have been particularly criticised by Chinese Communist military generals, for they had waged a “protracted war” and defeated their Nationalist rivals and established the People’s Republic of China in 1949. The main criticism is that this proposition may have been valid in Sun Zi’s time when states were small, and populations and resources were limited. In fact, even before the “war of liberation”, there were wars of longer duration in China. Even in Kautilya’s time, the expansion of the Mauryan Empire was not achieved in swift and decisive short wars as its reach extended to the frontiers of Punjab in the north and to the kingdoms of south India. In the contemporary context, it may be pointed out that the Chinese Communist experience with wars since the Fifties is a mixed bag. The Korean War (1950–53) was of a relatively longer duration, but the Sino-Indian (1962), Sino-Vietnamese (1979) and other wars were short and swift. Even from the Indian point of view, the three wars with Pakistan, over Kashmir in the late Forties and early Fifties, and the wars of 1965 and 1971 were of relatively shorter duration. Hence, the proposition that the duration of the war is determined by resources, morale, and other factors, both internal and external, remains valid ancient wisdom.
Role of Deception

The concept of deception forms a major aspect of Sun Zi’s treatise. He observed rather unequivocally: “All warfare is based on deception”. Deception is of several kinds such as feigning incapacity when ready to attack; formulation of baits to “lure the enemy”; when near the enemy, making it appear one is farther away, etc. There are several instances in Chinese history of how the various successful rulers practised the art of deception to achieve their goals. If one were to interpret the meaning of deception according to Sun Zi and the ancient Chinese practices of this act, one may say that its meaning is twofold. It means both to delude others into believing in one thing, while doing exactly the opposite as well as the art of outmanoeuvring the opponent by a deceptive strategy of a very high order as in a game of chess where you lay a complex trap for the opponent’s pieces while suggesting an alternative course of action and thus spring a surprise. During World War II, the strategy of the German Panzer units, which by- passed the so-called impregnable French Maginot Line by crossing the hilly Ardennes in May 1940, constituted a classic act of deception and surprise. Further, another idea of Sun Zi, of void and actuality, creating an illusion of emptiness or for that matter, sufficiency, is indeed an extension of the concept of deception.

Kautilya has also taken into account the art of deception in war. However, he has included it in the category of covert activities and psychological warfare which he noted as tricks, strategems and even occult practices. In sum, both believed in using deception as a tool to advance the cause of the conqueror or any king. Sun Zi made it a fundamental factor in the business of military gamesmanship. Hence, Sun Zi’s concept could be placed in the category of “tactics”, while that of Kautilya in the subversive operational module. Both have underlined the factor of flexibility.

Terrain and Ground

Sun Zi’s terrain and ground analyses could essentially be seen as a set of principles to fight wars in varying geographical conditions of the land. He said: “It is by the proper use of the ground that both strong and weak forces are used to best advantage”. He added that a general must also study the nine varieties of ground to take either an aggressive or a defensive posture and if he is unaware of even one of the nine types, he is “unfit to command the armies of a hegemonic king”. Closely related to his analysis of geographical factors, is his advice that “local guides” should be used—in the critical sense—to gain advantage of the ground. Charts 4.1 and 4.2 explain Sun Zi’s classifications.

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Strategic Implications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Accessible</td>
<td>Location where the armies of the king and his enemy can traverse with equal case.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Entangling</td>
<td>Easy to reach, difficult to get out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Temporising</td>
<td>Disadvantageous to both the king and the enemy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Precipitous</td>
<td>Advantageous to one who occupies sunny heights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Distant</td>
<td>Disadvantageous to do battle with an enemy of equal strength.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Having Narrow Passes</td>
<td>One who occupies the passes first, gets the advantage.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One may find some overlapping in the terrain and ground analysis of Sun Zi, but the thrust of the argument is that in both strategic and tactical terms, these factors play a vital role in determining the outcome of the war, whether it is victory, stalemate, or defeat.

Kautilya has provided seven types of terrain. These are shown in Chart 4.3.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variety</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dispersive</td>
<td>The territory of the feudal lord itself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frontier</td>
<td>Where a shallow penetration into enemy territory is achieved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key</td>
<td>Equally advantageous to occupy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open</td>
<td>Ground equally accessible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focal</td>
<td>When a stale is enclosed by three other states. One who gains control of it will gain the support of the majority of the other states.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
<td>When an army has penetrated into enemy territory leaving behind enemy cities and towns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult</td>
<td>March through mountains, forests, marshes, precipitous ground and other such places,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encircled</td>
<td>Ground where access is constricted, the way out is difficult, where a small enemy force can strike a larger one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desperate</td>
<td>Ground where the army has to light with courage or desperation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


One may find some overlapping in the terrain and ground analysis of Sun Zi, but the thrust of the argument is that in both strategic and tactical terms, these factors play a vital role in determining the outcome of the war, whether it is victory, stalemate, or defeat.

Kautilya has provided seven types of terrain. These are shown in Chart 4.3.

Chart 4.3. Terrain in Kautilya.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terrain</th>
<th>Prospects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Forests</td>
<td>If the terrain is equally suitable to both the king and the enemy, the odds of victory are even.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Villages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Mountain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Watery land</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Dry fens</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Plains</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) Uneven land</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The classical Indian Army consisted of four units; elephants, chariots, cavalry and infantry. Their use during various seasons is given in Chart 4.4.

Chart 4.4. Seasons and War Machine.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Season</th>
<th>Use of War Machine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hot weather</td>
<td>Elephants should not be used as they become dull and cannot drink or bathe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monsoon or</td>
<td>Elephant units will be used with infantry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regions with plenty of water:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little rain or</td>
<td>Horses, donkeys, camels (and infantry?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>muddy water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desert during rain</td>
<td>All four arms</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Kaulitly has also prescribed the best possible seasons for war when natural factors of the environment could be taken advantage of as an input to ensure victory for the conqueror.

Besides terrain, Kaulitly has also listed the kinds of ground that are suitable for the four arms of the king (Chart 4.5)

Chart 4.5  Ground Suitable for Fighting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Type of Arms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Level ground</td>
<td>Good for all four arms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Ground with small clefts, small stones, small pits and trees</td>
<td>Good for horses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Ground with big tree thickets, trees, creepers, etc.</td>
<td>Good for infantry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Ground with traversible mountains, water, uneven places, trees and creepers that can be cut and no clefts</td>
<td>Good for elephants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Ground without thorns, not too uneven, with room for retreat</td>
<td>Good for infantry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Ground with large room for retreat, free from mud water and bogs and devoid of pebbles</td>
<td>Good for horses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) Ground with dust, mud, water, reeds, without obstruction by big branches of trees, etc.</td>
<td>Good for elephants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) Ground with water reservoirs and shelters, without fields under water and even, enabling a turnaround</td>
<td>Good for chariots</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


It needs to be explained here that the suitability for a particular type of arms outlined by Kaulitly does not mean that basic units like infantry or squads of guerillas cannot operate in these places. His view, it appears, is that specified grounds are especially agreeable to certain kinds of mounted arms.

**Battle Formations**

As regards the formations and their use, except for square and circular formations, the Seven Military Classics, including the *Art of War* do not mention any other. During the Tang Dynasty (618–907 A.D.), square, circular, curved, straight, and angular formations were noted. Sun Bin, the descendant of Sun Zi, has mentioned a variety of formations in his work and hence one may say that these formations were the work of the Sun Zi school. Some of these are theoretical propositions while others may have been derived from studies of actual combat (Chart 4.6).

Chart 4.6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Square formation</td>
<td>Cutting the enemy. Sides are thicker, middle is thin, reserve formations at the rear. Thinner middle for rapid response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Circular formation</td>
<td>Unifying the troops.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Diffused deployment</td>
<td>Rapid flexible response tactics lie in creating small operational units. Advance, retreat, defence and holding frontal assaults. Exploiting the enemy’s soft spots to press forward, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Concentrated deployment</td>
<td>Prevent being cut off and taken by the enemy. When they are compressed, gather the blades at the front and extend forward while the front and the rear mutually support each other.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
There are 15 other formations noted by Sun Bin. These are: (1) Closed. (2) Cloud array. (3) Dense. (4) Eight (5) Elongated. (6) Endangered. (7) Entangled. (8) Extended horizontal. (9) Fierce wind. (10) Floating march. (11) Piercing. (12) Sharp. (13) Solid. (14) Strong front. (15) Whirlwind. It may also be noted that, strictly speaking, incendiary and dark raising formations are not actual battlefield formations as their roles have more to do with conflagration and psychological warfare. Obviously, they were specialised units with specific objectives.

In the Kautilyan system too, there is a listing of formations and arrays, and, in some cases, the special ways in which they should be deployed in the battlefield. The order of battle is called Vyuha in Sanskrit and the deployment of the forces in array form is a major part of the tactics within the overall framework of planned offensive or defensive on the battlefield. In the Mahabharata epic, several kinds of arrays were employed during the “Great War” and subsequently they were systematically analysed and placed in a theoretical framework of tactical doctrine. In this sphere, Kautilya has cited the authority of old masters such as Ushanas and Brihaspati, to validate his views.

In Kautilya’s scheme, there are four basic arrays and their modifications, depending on the battlefield requirements produce several designs. The basics are given in Chart 4.7.

Chart 4.6. (Continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(5) Awl formation</td>
<td>Decisively severing the enemy. Sharp tip like a sword and a substantial foundation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Wild geese formation</td>
<td>Exchanging archery fire, attacking from three sides and not letting the enemy out from the net.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) Hooked formation</td>
<td>Means by which to change targets and alter plans. Front ranks square close, enjoined on the left and right hooked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) Dark raising formation</td>
<td>Causing confusion among the people of the enemy and placing obstacles to his plans. Infantry plays a critical role and chariots a secondary role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9) Incendiary deployment</td>
<td>Means to seize the enemy’s encampments with the use of fire by taking into account the direction of the wind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10) Acquatic deployment</td>
<td>Infantry numerous, chariots few, and other equipment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Defensive</td>
<td>Mount flank attack, following the current How.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Offensive</td>
<td>Nimble boats as flags, swift boats as messengers, pursue the retreating enemy. Estimate strengths, strike their boats, seize the fords, and signal the coming of infantry.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


There are 15 other formations noted by Sun Bin. These are: (1) Closed. (2) Cloud array. (3) Dense. (4) Eight (5) Elongated. (6) Endangered. (7) Entangled. (8) Extended horizontal. (9) Fierce wind. (10) Floating march. (11) Piercing. (12) Sharp. (13) Solid. (14) Strong front. (15) Whirlwind. It may also be noted that, strictly speaking, incendiary and dark raising “formations” are not actual battlefield formations as their roles have more to do with conflagration and psychological warfare. Obviously, they were specialised units with specific objectives.

In the Kautilyan system too, there is a listing of formations and arrays, and, in some cases, the special ways in which they should be deployed in the battlefield. The order of battle is called Vyuha in Sanskrit and the deployment of the forces in array form is a major part of the tactics within the overall framework of planned offensive or defensive on the battlefield. In the Mahabharata epic, several kinds of arrays were employed during the “Great War” and subsequently they were systematically analysed and placed in a theoretical framework of tactical doctrine. In this sphere, Kautilya has cited the authority of old masters such as Ushanas and Brihaspati, to validate his views.

In Kautilya’s scheme, there are four basic arrays and their modifications, depending on the battlefield requirements produce several designs. The basics are given in Chart 4.7.

Chart 4.7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Arrays</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Staff array (Danda.)</td>
<td>Operating evenly with wings, flanks and centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Snake array (Bhoga)</td>
<td>Operating unevenly with wings, flanks and centre. It moves like a serpent’s or cow’s urination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Circle array (Mandala)</td>
<td>Multi-directional movement. The wings, flanks and centre become one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Dispersed array (Asamhata)</td>
<td>Disjointed formation of wings, flanks and centre.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each of these arrays by modification, extension, constriction and rearrangement could be transformed into different tactical designs; For instance, the staff in a straight line is the “needle”; two staffs is the “bracelet”; four staffs is “invincible”. Other variations are “splitter, strengthener unbearable and falcon”. In reverse, these become “bow, bow-flank, established, well established” respectively. There are about 17 variations. There are similar designs for the other basic arrays and these number about 28. If we were to include the four arms formations (infantry, chariots, cavalry and elephants) and individual formations of these four, the total comes to 33 designs of basic arrays. However, it needs to be noted that explanations have not been provided, for instance, on how the Dwajara, four-lined staff array, has invincibility. What happens if the enemy has also formed such an array? In sum, while there was elaborate study of the extent and usefulness of formations, the question of a undefeatable formation even in the context of Kautilya’s time, is indeed, a debatable proposition. The Kautilyan system too in many respects had envisaged set-piece battles in many situations, like a game of chess, and the tactics lay in transforming basic formations in the theatre of war to meet the challenges of the enemy’s formations. In other words, tactical flexibility is at the core of these transformations. However, what kind of advantage a crab or fish formation can provide is unclear.

A similar comment could be made on some of the formations in the Sun Zi system. It has also attributed special characteristics to certain formations without explaining how they are realised in operational terms. Presumably, since the objective is to highlight them as valuable tactics, these concepts were not explained in detail and it was left to the genius of the commanders to employ them for optimum advantage in appropriate situations. Further, the Chinese tacticians have created, over the years, several conceptual diagrams on formations, but according to an analyst “most seem incongruous, merely the product of imagination”.

**Morphology of Victory**

According to Sun Zi, five fundamental factors, and seven elements determine the victory for the king. The five factors are: (a) elements that create harmony between the ruler and people; (b) weather conditions; (c) nature of the terrain; (d) quality of military leadership; and (e) doctrine, that is army structure, ordnance and logistics. The seven crucial elements are: (a) superior wisdom and ability of the ruler; (b) talents of the commander (it is repeated here); (c) superior command and control of the army; (d) better exploitation of the terrain; (e) higher levels of troop strength; (f) higher quality of training; and (g) enlightened and correct distribution of rewards and punishments. An army that has all these in its favour will be victorious, observed Sun Zi.

Kautilya’s analysis is similar and it is noted in many of the chapters. He has assigned importance to the following factors that enable a king to succeed in war: (a) the king’s concern for the people’s welfare; (b) analysis of weather; (c) nature of the terrain; (d) estimation of relative strengths of the king and the enemy and the situation in the rear; (e) acceptance of sound counsel; (f) a well paid and honoured army kept in full strength; (g) well organised structure of defence and its logistics; (h) sound grasp of the principle of inter-relatedness of power, place (terrain) and time (season); (i) an army trained for battle-readiness; and (j) a king adept at waging four kinds war—war by diplomacy, war by arms, concealed (psychological) warfare and clandestine warfare.

In other words, both agree that if all these factors are present in favour of the conqueror, his victory in war is a forgone conclusion. If both the conqueror and the enemy are endowed with similar factors, the advice of both Sun Zi and Kautilya is to avoid military conflict and seek other means to weaken the enemy and bide for an opportune time to strike. These conclusions, in their essentials, are indeed valid even in the contemporary context of conventional strategies of waging wars at different levels.

**Management of External Relations**

Sun Zi has attached equal importance to diplomacy and foreign policy as an effective instrument to further the interests of the state. For instance, Sun Zi was in favour of forging an alliance between
his Wu kingdom with that of Qi in order to battle the adjoining kingdom of Cu, that is, adopting the strategy of disrupting the enemy’s alliances. “It is also the idea of defeating the enemy by strategic considerations.” Sun Zi observed that “the highest realisation of warfare is to attack the enemy’s plans; next is to attack their alliances; next is to attack their army; and the lowest is to attack their fortified cities.” As may be gleaned from this succinct statement, disruption of the enemy’s alliances is placed second in terms of priority after a strategic understanding of his plans. That is, foreign policy which orders or breaks external interactions is seen as a crucial key to success in war.

In fact, a Chinese commentator has provided three examples, two from ancient times and one from the World War II phase to validate this contention. For instance, he has opined that the Nazi-Soviet Pact of the Thirties should be seen as an example of diplomacy to gain time, and advantage, particularly by the then Soviet leadership. One could also cite a more recent example from the Sixties when China forged bonds and signed border agreements and understandings with India’s neighbours while advancing border claims vis-à-vis India. The examples from ancient China have been advanced to illustrate the point of weakening the two allies by diplomatic means to gain advantage for the hegemon. The sum and substance of Sun Zi’s argument is: a sound foreign policy is an essential part of a sovereign’s strategic preparations for war or for that matter, keeping the adversary or adversaries in check during times of peace. But it needs to be noted that neither Sun Zi nor his successor Sun Bin has made an elaborate foreign policy construct as Kautilya has done.

In the Kautilyan scheme, like that of Sun Zi, the alliance system, either forging or breaking one, to the advantage of the sovereign has a central role. Having said that, one may add that Kautilya has built a system of “circle of states” as the area of a hegemonic king’s diplomacy. In brief, it is as follows: there are two circles of states, adversaries, and friends, that constitute the field of operations for the sovereign. These are antagonist, enemy (neighbouring king), friend, ally of the antagonist, ally of the friend, enemy’s ally’s friend, enemy in the rear, ally in the rear, rear enemy’s friend, rear friend’s ally, weak intervening king, neutral king and middle king. These broad categories have been further sub-divided into categories that take into account various characteristics of allies and enemy and vassals and their specific motivations, compulsions for adopting certain courses of action, and other issues such as an ally abrogating the treaty, etc. are examined. In order to operate in this configuration of states, Kautilya has advocated six methods of foreign policy. These are given in Chart 4.8.

### Chart 4.8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Choice</th>
<th>Strategic Factor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Marking peace</td>
<td>When the king is in relative decline vis-a-vis the enemy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Staying quiet</td>
<td>King and enemy are equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Preparing for wars</td>
<td>King has special advantages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Active waging war</td>
<td>King is superior in power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Seeking support</td>
<td>King is depleted in power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Dual policy</td>
<td>Making peace with one, waging war against another.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


On the basis of these methods, according to Kautilya, the king should operationalise his policy in consonance with the appropriate strategic factor. Two other basic points emerge from Kautilya’s treatise: the role of the middle king and the role of the neutral king. While he is not directly a party to the conflict between the conqueror and his enemy, the middle king who shares a common frontier with the adversary may be more powerful than both and the neutral king who does not share a border with either of them could be even more strong. They may not exist in many situations but if they do, their potential role in the conflict has to be taken into account. Kautilya suggests several ways to deal with both issues. He has shown considerable concern about the issue of dealing with
the enemy in the rear and how a weak king should cope with both invasion and war.\textsuperscript{38} In sum, both Sun Zi and Kautilya attached considerable importance to foreign policy in the overall strategic structure of war and peace. Both advocated war only after critical evaluations and sufficient agumentation of power. Both believed that wars are expensive and that gains should outweigh the losses. And foreign policy is a means to create conditions for maximising profits with a minimum or acceptable level of deficit. And this will be achieved after a fundamental analysis of the correlation of power among various state-actors within a given strategic environment.

**Second Oldest Profession**

Both Sun Zi and Kautilya assigned a pride of place to the intelligence structure of the state. It was seen as one of the critical components in arriving at the right decisions, making correct estimations of the enemy’s strength, and for launching clandestine operations, including wet operations, on behalf of the state. The “second oldest profession” in the world as the intelligence set-up is often called, was developed into a highly sophisticated organisation ruthlessly clinical in its execution and all-pervasive in conceptual framework. In modern and current times, intelligence has become more complex owing to technological innovations from simple Morse codes to spy-in-the-sky satellites. And the “leap” achieved by electronic and information technology in the past decades has revolutionised the organisation of intelligence. However, the employment of spies and intelligence personnel continues to remain a basic and valid input even today, as it was in the days of Sun Zi and Kautilya. Sun Zi, with enviable precision, observed:

> Now the reason a brilliant sovereign and a wise general conquer the enemy whenever they move and their achievements surpass those of ordinary men is their foreknowledge of the enemy situation. This “foreknowledge” cannot be elicited from spirits, nor from gods, nor by analogy with past events, nor by astrological calculations. It must be obtained from men who know the enemy situation.\textsuperscript{39}

As regards Kautilya, his masterly chapters on secret service and covert operations both in terms of concept and detail, in their essence, have immense contemporary relevance. Speaking about the relationship between might, energy (enthusiasm) and counsel, he said that a good combination of all the three is the best, but the power of counsel is superior to mere might. For, “the king with his eyes of intelligence and science is able to take counsel with small effort and over-reach enemies possessed of energy and might by conciliation and other means and by secret and occult practices”.\textsuperscript{40} It may be added that “occult” means are part of his concept of psychological warfare. Commenting on wet operations, Kautilya observed with chilling logic: “An assassin, single-handed, may be able to achieve his end with weapon, poison and fire. He does the work of the whole army or more.”\textsuperscript{41} He has also underlined the importance of the “miracle of secret instigation”, that is, subversion. The extensive nature of the intelligence operations is indicated by the following guideline: “A king shall have his agents in the courts of the enemy, the ally, the middle and neutral kings as well as their eighteen types of high officials”\textsuperscript{42}. These citations from the two strategists have been made to highlight the similarity in their approach to the role of intelligence in safeguarding the interests of the state and expanding its influence in an era when human intelligence (HUMINT) constituted the bedrock of all covert activities. More importantly, their ideas on the organisation of the intelligence structure also have striking similarities as shown in Charts 4.9, 4.10, 4.11, 4.12.

It may be noted from the above charts that Sun Zi has only provided a basic structure which presumably had further sub-divisions and sub-structures in operational terms. Further, it may be noted that Sun Zi has not listed the category of counter-intelligence and intelligence within the country. But the internal intelligence organisation is implicitly acknowledged when discussing the double agent who is essentially a spy of the enemy who has been entrapped and turned around to serve the king. Those who trap such agents undoubtedly belong to the internal intelligence unit. It appears Sun Zi, a general in the army, obviously did not discuss the issue because the role of such units falls within the confines of the state. Moreover, in Sun Zi’s view, the double agent should be paid handsomely as he is a king-pin for operations in enemy territory. Sun Zi also upheld the comprehensive nature of intelligence when he said;
“There is no place where espionage is not possible”. However, he made it clear that “only the enlightened sovereign and the wise general who are able to use the most intelligent people as spies can achieve great results”.\textsuperscript{43} Needless to add, Sun Zi looked upon intelligence as a facilitator for realising the strategic and military objectives of the state with a well prepared framework.

Kautilya, too, constructed a comprehensive structure of intelligence. His system is replete with detailed analyses of the functions of the various categories of people who could be employed as spies and the kind of special roles they could perform. In fact, Kautilya like Sun Zi—again an astonishing similarity—is of the view that no segment of society—one’s own and the enemy’s—and no place is beyond the scope of intelligence. Charts 4.9, 4.10, 4.11 and 4.12 provide the organisational structure of the intelligence establishment.

Chart 4.9.

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}
\node (king) {KING};
\node (command) [below of=king] {COMMANDER OF THE ARMY};
\node (local) [left of=command] {LOCAL SPY};
\node (double) [right of=local] {DOUBLE AGENT};
\node (dead) [right of=double] {DEAD OR EXPENDABLE SPY};
\node (living) [right of=dead] {LIVING SPY};
\node (internal) [right of=living] {INTERNAL SPY};

\draw [->] (king) -- (command);
\draw [->] (local) -- (command);
\draw [->] (double) -- (command);
\draw [->] (dead) -- (command);
\draw [->] (living) -- (command);
\draw [->] (internal) -- (command);

\node at (local) {Agent in a local district in enemy country (limited in place)};
\node at (double) {Enemy’s spies turned to the king’s side, vital role to play in recruiting other categories such as local and internal spies};
\node at (dead) {Role in disinformation, creating confusion. They are provided with false information to report to the enemy};
\node at (living) {Gather information, collate and return with reports};
\node at (internal) {Officials in the enemy camp for subversion, assassination, etc.};

\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

Derived by the author
Chart 4.10.

**Internal Intelligence**

- KING
  - CLANDESTINE AGENTS
    - AGENTS STATIONED IN ONE PLACE
      - INTELLIGENCE OFFICER
      - UDESHITA MONK
    - ROVING AGENTS
    - DOUBLE AGENTS
      - REGULAR AGENTS
      - SECRET AGENT
      - ASSASSIN
      - POISONER
      - PERIPATETIC NUNS
    - COUNTER ESPIONAGE
      - OTHER AGENTS IN DISGUISES
      - OCCASIONAL AGENTS


---

Chart 4.11.

**Chancellor's Intelligence Unit**

- KING
  - CHANCELLOR
    - AGENTS UNDER VARIOUS QUISSES
      - HOUSE HOLDER
      - TRADER
      - HOLY MAN
      - FORMER THIEVES
      - OTHER DISGUISES

Roving agents and other clandestine agents listed in Chart 4.10 also, it appears, played some part.

It is evident from these charts that the Kautilyan system of intelligence encompassed all spheres of human activity and assigned roles for various categories of people in society. The complete list of spies would suggest that categories such as prostitutes, wine makers, bar owners, etc. were also utilised to further the cause of the king. What appears to be notable in the Kautilyan system is the separate unit controlled by the chancellor and the bifurcation of internal and external intelligence units. The coordination of inputs from these units was presumably made at the higher levels, it is also significant to note that the chancellor’s unit dealt exclusively with economic crimes and performed anti-corruption and vigilance functions, an amazingly sophisticated unit in the context of Kautilyan times. In Sun Zi’s time, whether such units existed or not is not clear. Even if they did, they were probably managed by the official class and Sun Zi restricted himself to the study of the taxonomy of war and security.

It may be noted that both thinkers dealt with double spies, but Sun Zi has attached much greater importance to them than Kautilya. The roles of Sun Zi’s internal spies in enemy camps and similar spies in the Kautliyan schema are similar; subversion, assassination, passing vital information to the conqueror, etc. Both suggested the need for spy establishments in enemy countries, and the employment of local spies restricted to a place. In fact, Kautilya has attached considerable importance to economic intelligence.

Kautilya has gone into great detail on issues such as targets of subversion in the enemy country —apart from the 18 categories of high officials, the methodology of entrapment of enemies,
including the use of the “honey-trap”, bringing about dissensions in the enemy king’s family, particularly among the princes, etc. In short, Sun Zi sharply highlighted the basics, while Kautilya besides doing that, has added an operational manual to his treatise in the sphere of intelligence; they complement each other.

**The End Game**

Both Sun Zi and Kautilya, while systematically exploring the taxonomy of strategy, the mechanics of wars and the architecture of peace, took into account the ideas and practices of the earlier epochs. Particularly, Kautilya makes repeated references to these—either in terms of affirmation or repudiation. In the case of China, some historical or literary accounts of antiquity refer to them. In the case of India, such accounts were passed on in the oral tradition during ancient times. Presumably, during Kautilya’s time, they were available on palm-leaf manuscripts. It is from these that he may have gleaned these thoughts—apart from the various teachers under whom he studied. In other words, both thinkers were aware of the heritage in this sphere. Their genius lay in absorbing the essence of the past and formulating in innovative and unique fashion the fundamentals of war and peace.

Both were sage-like personalities. Sun Zi was reportedly a general in the army and, hence, had the practical experience of war. On the other hand, Kautilya learnt about war by constant observation and analysis. This is clearly evident from his writings on war which included everything from strategic approaches to, say, the required monthly rations for the cavalry. It is unfortunate that in popular perception Kautilya is more renowned for his exhaustive manuals on management of the state, that is, administration and some popular quotes on foreign policy. His contribution to the study of war, which is equally outstanding, has, for some inexplicable reasons, not been adequately studied or understood.

One may take into account in this context, the military tradition and culture of both China and India. In the ancient period, both had a vigorous military culture promoted by various kingdoms competing for supremacy. But there is a crucial difference: Chinese generals and analysts sustained military thinking as an independent discipline. For instance, even after Sun Zi had passed from the scene, his descendant, Sun Bin (bora reportedly in 380 B.C) who lived more than a hundred years later, wrote a treatise on *Military Methods*, which expounded on some practical issues in war, by elaborating on Sun Zi’s ideas. In the subsequent centuries, other great generals amplified further the basics on war in the light of their experiences and the changed times. Even Mao Zedong, the founder of the PRC, and a great military strategist, cited in his works Sun Zi and other works—both literary and military—that dealt with war.

Having said that one may add that a vigorous Chinese strategic culture existed down the centuries as an adjunct to the Confucius-Mencius state system, which, among other things, suggested a preferred order in dealing with the adversaries. These are (1) accommodation; (2) defensive strategies; and (3) offensive action in minimal terms and only under unavoidable circumstances with a clear objective of restoring a righteous order.

On the other hand, this strategic culture projected, what has been described by a scholar as a “Parabellum” paradigm, which looked upon conflict as a continuing feature in human existence and confrontation with the adversary, a zero-sum game in which employment of force is a critical choice without any alternative. And accommodation takes the last rung in the list of choices. However, the use of force is governed by factors such as appropriate conditions to launch offensives. This paradigm has further been amplified as a “hard realpolitik strategic culture that in essence argues that the best way of dealing with security threats is to eliminate them through the use of force. This preference is tempered by the explicit sensitivity to one’s relative capacity to do this. At the simplest, the operational strategic culture predisposes those socialized in it to act more creatively against the enemy as relative capabilities become more favourable”.

It may be highlighted in this context that this kind of strategic culture is not unique to China. The Kautilyan treatise too is a hard realpolitik exercise for the hegemonic king but it has also included a list of strategic options for the king in which the use of force is treated as the last option when other methods to outmanoeuvre the adversary have failed. This is somewhat close to the
Confucius-Mencius paradigm noted earlier. At the same time, Kautilya’s operational methods have critically indicated multi-faceted use force to subdue an adversary. Both strategic cultures also invested a moral dimension to wars, such as righteous war to restore moral order (China) and Dharma Yuddha, or just war to punish the unjust (India). In other words, there was a similarity between the two strategic cultures in the ancient times. The vital difference is that China’s strategic culture was constantly debated down the centuries.

On the other hand, while the Indian military tradition and culture flourished, the military achievements of various dynasties indicated that there were no sustained efforts to update the military thought propounded by Kautilya. There were no counterparts to Sun Bin and others. Even if they did exist, there is no evidence to substantiate the thesis of continuity, as written accounts of dynasties are not available. Whatever is available has been reconstructed from edicts, sculpture, literary and other sources. These were made possible during the British period of India when scholarly works on modern lines came to be produced by both foreign and Indian scholars. It is one of those happy accidents that Kautilya’s manuscript came to light in the early part of this century.

Moreover, it needs to be noted that during the Muslim and Mughal rule in India, the conquerors adopted their own system of military strategies. Subsequently, when British rule was established, the strategic and tactical priorities were fashioned to ensure imperial dominance. In sum, Kautilyan strategic culture declined with the decline of Hindu India. In the case of China, histories and literary works dealing with dynasties came to be written and preserved. Many of them may not be accurate, but they do provide some details of the military culture.

Having said that one, may add that even in China where the generals studied the Seven Military Classics and which boasted of several military schools in ancient times, military studies were not accorded a high status. The less said the better about China’s elite’s perception of the role of the military in society. According to an old saying, “Good iron is not used to make a nail, nor a good man to make a soldier”. Notwithstanding the fact that the military had played such a significant role in establishing and sustaining several dynasties, the Confucian litterati who dominated the government looked upon the military as nothing more than a necessary evil and castigated them, if and when they seized power by force of arms. As Fairbank aptly puts it: “It took a soldier to found a dynasty, but he and his descendants invariably found it easier to rule as sages through civilian officials. This is undoubtedly because power over the Chinese economy settled in the hands of administrators, bureaucrats who got wealth in the form of revenues...The bureaucratic polity of China sought constantly to avoid domination by any independent military power”. This happened because feudalism disappeared in China earlier than in many places and the warrior yielded place to the bureaucrat. Thus, one may see the emergence of modern civilian control over the military in the ancient Chinese bureaucratic dominance. Even alien military conquerors who settled in China accepted this system in its essentials. This is in contrast to the significant role played by military generals in the selection of the emperor in ancient Rome, for instance.

However, it may be pointed out that generals who were accorded honour by the state, were a privileged section of the old Chinese society, kept in check by various means. Although they led the army, the army itself was composed of conscripted peasants, Moreover, some troops guarding the royals had a special place. During the Manchu Dynasty (1644–1911), the Manchu Bannermen had special privileges. However, during the Republican period, warlordism became the order of the day and the military ruled the roost in the absence of the emperor who was regarded as the “Son of Heaven” (1916–1927) before the Nationalists again united China, in other words, despite the fact that China perpetuated a military culture since the days of Sun Zi, it was not the dominant motif in the Chinese system, governed by the principles of Confucius. After Mao’s spectacular victory over the Chinese Nationalists by innovative methods of warfare, the military acquired a high status, but it was made clear that the “Party commands the gun” as the Communists settled down to chart the destiny of China. To put it briefly, what we call civil-military relations today, where the civilian authority generally has a pre-eminent role in governing the nation, was—and is—a part of the organisation of the Chinese state.

In the Kautilyan system, the military or the generals and their chief, the Senapati, belonged to a privileged elite. In fact, the Senapati was paid the highest salary, at the same scale as that of the five
other highest categories of officials, priests, and the crown prince. This was to dissuade him, among other things, from acts of treachery. However, the king ruled with the help of councillors, ministers and other officials down to the village level. These high civilian officials, particularly the chancellor, controlled the purse-strings and conducted the affairs of the state. And a tight-knit intelligence system kept a watch over their conduct. In this sense, the military was subordinate to the civil authority. Even the military leaders who overthrew dynasties took to the system of civilian management of state—as it was in China.

However, there is significant difference between the Indian and Chinese systems. In the Indian society, a professional warrior class (Kshatriyas) came to be institutionalised as a part of the four-fold caste system. They were looked upon as a distinct group of people to lead the nation at war, although the army itself was conscripted from the merchant and peasant classes. In this respect, the position of the warrior caste in India is similar to that of the Samurai class in Japan which held onto its professional status until the middle of the 19th century. Ancient China did not have a professional warrior class, although men of nobility led the army.

To recapitulate, there are striking similarities between Sun Zi and Kautilya in delineating strategic and tactical issues relating to war and peace, it may well be true that some of their specific points and battle formations are not valid any longer because of the changes in weapon systems and strategies down the centuries, particularly in the modern times. However, the wisdom of the two strategists on the basic issue of how to approach war and peace and on issues of intelligence and foreign policy is as fresh today as it was in their epochs. For, both despised unbridled aggrandisement without thought, or unplanned adventurist offensives. Both considered ensuring the safety of the state and the welfare of its people as the ultimate objective. If a state could achieve its objectives without war, that should be the most preferred course, said Sun Zi. He observed: “Attaining one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the pinnacle of excellence. Subjugating the enemy’s army without fighting is the true pinnacle of excellence.”

This, in simple terms, would mean encircling the enemy by various means in order to make him totally ineffective—a result that can be realised only by a strategic genius. Emphasising this aspect, Kautilya said: “An archer letting off an arrow may or may not kill a single man, but a wise man using his intellect can kill, even reaching unto the very womb.”

Notes

[Note: The Chinese names in text are rendered in the Hanyu Pinjan system while in the footnotes, the system adopted by the books cited is retained]

2. Ibid., p. 133.
8. See Tao Hanzhang, n. 1, p. 16.
9. See Griffith, n. 6, pp. 17–19; Also see Sawyer, n. 7, pp. 60–62.
11. Ibid., p. 61.
12. See the arguments in Ibid., pp. 59–115.
23. Ibid.
28. Ibid., pp. 128.
30. See, for details, Kangle, n. 3. pp. 450–453.
33. See, for details, Rangarajan, n. 4. chapter 10. sections 6-8 and chapter 11, section 1–2, pp. 625–655, pp. 676–685.
34. Tao Hanzhang, n. 1. p. 27.
35. Sawyer, n. 5. p. 18.
37. See, for details, Rangarajan, n. 4. pp. 542–545.
38. Ibid., pp. 548–50.
40. See Kamgle, n. 3. p. 407.
41. Ibid., p. 425.
42. Rangarajan, n. 4. p. 498.
46. Ibid.
48. Sawyer, n. 5. p. 50.
49. Rangarajan, n. 4. p. 675.