KAUTILYA ON DIPLOMACY

Kautilya believed that nations acted in their political, economic and military self-interest.

He thought that foreign policy or diplomacy will be practiced as long as the sell-interest

of the state is served because every state acts in a way to maximize the power and self

interest. He thought that the world was in such a state that a kingdom was either at war or

was preparing for a war and diplomacy was yet another weapon used in this constant

warfare. He believed that diplomacy is a series of actions taken by a kingdom such that it

gains strength and eventually conquers the nation with which diplomatic ties were created.

He also believed that treaties should be made in such a way that King benefits and serves

the self-interest of the Kingdom. He did talk about violating treaties and creating

dissension between states so that his kingdom might benefit which directly is similar to

Bismarck’s strategies of treaties. In fact Kautilya can be compared to Bismarck that both

of them though of extremely complex network of treaties and relationships without any

successor in either case.

Kautilya described three types of political system namely rule making, rule application

and rule adjudication and has been recognized for his contributions to bringing diplomacy

at the helm of state’s affairs. In his words he defines diplomacy as, “A King who

understands the true implication of diplomacy conquers the whole world” 13 . To

understand his concept of diplomacy it is important to understand the Mandala concept,

six types of foreign policy and four solutions. I shall explain the Mandala concept which

is quite apt in today’s context.

13 Bharati Mukherjee, “Kautilya’s Concept of Diplomacy”

The Mandala Concept

The Mandala concept is one in which there are circles of friends and foes with the central

point being the King and his State. This embraces twelve kings in the vicinity and he

considers the kingdoms as neighbors, the states which are the enemies neighbors are his

enemies’ friends and the next circle of states are his friends. He also believes that the

states which are his neighbors and are also neighbors of his enemies are neutral and

should always be treated with respect. He believes that this circle is dynamic and the

King should strive to be expanding his central position and reduce the power of the other

kings in the vicinity. He also proposes to build alliances with states which are two

degrees away from the center to create a balance of power. Though Bismarck did not

exactly operate with the Mandala concept in Mind, I do see that he strived to create

alliances and ties to enhance his strength and expanding the power of German-Prussia.

The Mandala concept is more multipolar than the current structure we see. Though our

world has emerged into multipolar on the economic front, it is still unipolar on the

military front. Also the intermediate powers in today’s world play a major, thanks to De

Gaulle but in the Kautilyan world he did recognize the importance of middle powers. In

addition he mentions that war is an outcome of a power struggle and state sovereignty

hence he treats diplomacy as a temporary phenomenon. That being said he elaborates on

the six forms of diplomacy which I find very interesting and shall quote examples where

they can be used.

Six forms of Diplomacy14

Kautilya elaborates on strategies for not only the strong king and the aggressor but also

explains the strategies a weak king should follow to defend himself and protect the state.

His forms of diplomacy also depends on the type of the king whether the policy is

directed toward the superior, inferior or equal15. The six types of foreign policy that he

advocates are

1. Sandhi 16 : This means accommodation, which means that kings seek to

accommodate the each other and does not resolve to hostile means. These Sandhis

could be temporary or permanent and it depends on the environment and relative

powers of the kings. The various sub-forms in this sandhi have been practiced by

statesmen later. Bismarck had used Karmasandhi with Austria and now Britain’s

foreign policy has been to maintain Anavasitasandhi with the United States.

2. Vigraha: This means hostility shown to neighbor or a state. Kautilya strongly

believed that the states are always at war and seek power hence it is necessary to

have hostile foreign policy towards few states which are either equal in power or

subordinate in power.

3. Asana: This means indifference and he chooses this policy for states which are

neutral in his mandala concept of nations. He also believes that an indifferent

foreign policy works well in the case of equal power. I may not agree on this

point as we have seen in case of equal powers in history, there has been always

tension which either led to a war or an alliance. Germany viewed Britain as an

14 The six forms are explained in detail in Pushpendra Kumar, “Kautilya Arthasastra: An Appraisal” 15 He defines superiority or inferiority primarily on three dimensions: Military Power, Economic Power and Geographical Size 16 Sandhi in his view could be of five types: Mitrasandhi: With an ally on definite terms, Hiranyasandhi: Agreement based on transfer of wealth, Bhoomisandhi: Agreement based on transfer of land or territory, Karmasandhi: Agreement for exchange of military and Anavasitasandhi: Agreement to help colonize an unoccupied place

equal power and could not be indifferent neither could US be indifferent to Russia

during the cold war.

4. Dvaidhibhava: This means double policy which was very well practiced by

Bismarck. Kautilya advocates this foreign policy for states which are superior

militarily. Kissinger followed this strategy where he made alliance with China

such that at no time Russia and China could become closer in ties than US and

China. Kautilya advocated the same concept within his Mandala framework.

5. Samsarya: This policy of protection is followed where a stronger state intervenes

and shelters a weak state. Kautilya advocates this policy when a stronger state

needs a shield to protect itself from an equal power it is good to use this policy of

protection for a third state and use this alliance to defend against the potential

enemy. In one sense the colonization was followed where European powers

started controlling weak nations in Africa and Asia and thus strengthening their

position against one another.

6. Yana: This policy is to attack. Kautilya does mention that peace and stability in a

state makes the state even powerful but never shies away from attacking the weak

and unjust king. He thinks that an unjust king keeps the society unhappy which

makes that state a potential target as it is weak due to social unrest. Who knows

may George W. Bush read Kautilya before pursuing the Yana policy on Iraq!

Thus Kautilya’s foreign policy was formed by his strong belief in King and the state’s

continuous thirst for power and wealth. His diplomacy tactics were also influenced by

Hindu religion and the social structure which shaped his thinking in terms of types of

foreign policies and their application.

COMPARING KAUTILYA

Having looked at Kautilya’s approach to war, diplomacy and ethics, it is but important to

compare him with Plato and Machiavelli. I chose them because Plato was born before

Kautilya and has been considered as the greatest philosopher of all times. His view on

state, war and society could have been different because of the geographic origins of

these two great minds. I also chose Machiavelli because he is in recent history and also

has written extraordinarily on statescraft and both Kautilya and Machiavelli served a king.

Kautilya and Plato

Kautilya and Plato have many similarities in terms of social structure, belief in autocracy,

emphasis on virtues of honesty and favoring the elitist in the society. Kautilya endorsed

caste structure and approved of lower caste doing menial jobs while Plato strongly

favored slavery. But both men never discuss slavery in detail nor do they justify it as an

institution. Plato and Kautilya both thought the state should be governed by the learned

and elites while despising the idea of democracy. They thought democracy would result

in anarchy. Plato and Kautilya liked the idea of a military class and thought that the rulers

should come from that sect of the society. In addition they believed in honesty and just

behavior by the kings towards their subjects as Kautilya and so did Plato believe in the

state of happiness for the Nation.

The important difference comes between these two men come their support for different

parts of the society. While Kautilya favored the Brahmins or the priests to make the law

and policy he also favored the warriors to be the rulers. In case of Plato, he favored the

aristocrats to both rule and act as the intellect for the society. In addition Plato was a

philosopher and not a politician, while Kautilya was a seasoned politician with views on

philosophy. This becomes important because Kautilya has been time and again

reproached for being harsh and wicked in his treatise but I attribute it to his being

extreme side of realism having been a politician. The context in which Plato lived was a

group of small states with Athens only as the large empire. In the case of Kautilya, he

was part of a large state with centralized bureaucracy and an expanding empire. The other

key difference between them was the construction of the state. Plato believed in unity and

common good central to the state, while Kautilya thought military to be the focus of the

state and a powerful state can be created only by a strong military. In terms of diplomacy,

Plato has very little contribution towards foreign policy and infact thought foreign trade

was a negative influence on the state. In contrast, Kautilya has thought about diplomacy

and foreign policy elaborately. Similarly these two men differ on their economic policy

making where Plato thinks about the State as a provider of rule of law, Kautilya extracts

value from the citizens through taxes and redistributes wealth.

Overall I would say that Plato operated in a less complicated environment and his thought

process laid the foundation for future European statesman and politicians. In the case of

Kautilya he was part of a complicated web and enmeshed in politics hence his treatise is

less philosophical and scarcely idealist.

Kautilya and Machiavelli

Kautilya’s work comes from his myths and beliefs where as Machiavelli mainly writes

based on his experiences and examples from history. One of benefits of Kautilya’s work

is that this imagination has given his work a robust structure and can last over a period of

time. In addition Machiavelli’s work can be considered as one of the possible subsets of

Kautilya’s statecraft. The weakness of Kautilya’s work is that it is not empirical and is

not time tested. Yes, some of his writings were used by his King Maurya but they were

denounced by King Ashoka as wicked and cunning. In addition the language that

Machiavelli uses is very learned while Kautilya uses terse statements which make the

point. Though this might look to be more an issue of education and expression, I think

language is a representation of diplomacy and suaveness. In general Kautilya has been

criticized for being harsh and crude in dealing with spies and espionage and this language

differential only vouches for it even more. In my opinion, Machiavelli was a shrewd man

and did not want to explicitly write down that was implicitly known.