

INDIAN CLASSICS EMPOWER STRATEGIC THINKING

by
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The value of the classics for the modern world remains a controversial topic. Certain achievements of the past, such as the Pyramids in Egypt and the Antikythera mechanism in Greece, remain unsolved mysteries to scientists but encapsulate secrets that could be of contemporary relevance. In general, going back to ancient sources to derive information and data about, e.g., modern technology, and looking for inspiration to ancient authors, who discuss transportation with horses, in order to produce high-speed cars would appear counterintuitive. These considerations apply to a certain degree to the classics of statecraft and military strategy. In a world where wars are fought with advanced weapons, it would make little sense to draw lessons from ancient battles that took place with cavalry and swords. That said, the classics address a set of questions and topics that have been an enduring thread in the history of political and strategic thought and resonate with current debates.

Project *Udbhav*

One of the ongoing endeavors to explore the eternal wisdom of the Indian classics, especially in the context of strategic thought and statecraft, is Project *Udbhav* (evolution). *Udbhav* has been spearheaded by the [Centre for Military History and Conflict Studies \(CMHCS\)](#) of the [United Service Institution of India \(USI\)](#), India's oldest and foremost tri-service think tank (est. 1870) for research into national security and military affairs, in partnership with the [Army Training Command \(ARTRAC\)](#), one of the seven commands of the Indian Army.

The primary objective of this initiative is to bridge the past and the present by tracing the evolution of Indian military systems, strategy, strategic thought, and statecraft. *Udbhav* looks at new modes of harnessing the rich intellectual resources enshrined

in India's heritage by revisiting their relation to defense, security, conflict, and intelligence studies and how they can strengthen India's image and appeal as a major global player.

To that end, CMHCS has formed a cluster that consists of specialists from diverse disciplines, including historians, classical scholars, philologists, Indologists, political scientists, IR practitioners, and members of the strategic community. This group of specialists is expected to create a pool of expertise and engage in comprehensive analyses of the contemporary relationship between India's classics and its strategic culture in all of its variation and complexity. *Udbhav* will support the publication of high-end research aimed to foster more sophisticated discourse about how ancient Indian knowledge systems interacted with and shaped the development of western civilization.

Project *Udbhav* seeks to revisit the relevance of the Indian classics in connection with India's ascension from a middle power to an emerging great power on the world stage. Also, in recent years there has been a renewed and sharp increase in scholarly interest in [non-Western traditions that has highlighted the need to re-evaluate the Western paradigm in strategic thought and IR](#). As such, *Udbhav* has the potential to propose recommendations concerning the insights both India and the West can extrapolate from Indian classical sources for present and future use. For instance, Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (The Science of Material Success) is a useful case study for discussing how Indian philosophy can be used as one of the pillars of India's new strategic culture and grand strategy and open up new perspectives in the West with regard to hybrid warfare.

Kautilya to the Fore

The *Arthashastra* is the masterpiece of the seminal ancient Indian political and strategic thinker, Kautilya (Chanakya, fl. 4th century BCE), who served as adviser to Chandragupta, the founder of the Mauryan Empire. Kautilya's teachings constitute a valuable repository of ideas about various facets of modern and future warfare that render it pertinent to 21st-



century discourse about [hybrid warfare](#). Kautilya articulates the theory of the four *upayas* (skillful/expedient techniques), which includes: *sama* = friendly disposition that translates into temporary alliances and treaties; *dana* = gifts broadly construed (including alluring with money, bribery); *bheda* = use of ruses, exercising influence, fomenting discord and dissonance (note: this is an early precedent of the notion of cognitive domain operations); and *danda* = brute force (literally, punishment) (1.13.22–1.14.12; 7.14.11; 7.16.3–8; 12.1.18). In addition, the *Arthashastra* enumerates four types of war (*yuddha*): *prakashyuddha* = open war at a concrete time and location; *kutayuddha* = concealed war that entails irregular warfare and psychological operations, such as instigating treachery in the enemy's camp; *tusnimyuddha* = clandestine war that is associated with covert methods (secret agents, assassins, saboteurs, etc.) and refraining from direct military confrontation; and *mantrayuddha* = war of counsel/diplomacy pursued by a weak ruler or state (7.6.17; 7.6.40–41; 7.13.29; 12.1.17).

Kautilya can complement or even offer a potent alternative to such authors as the ancient Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu who have dominated Western approaches to hybrid warfare. Unlike Sun Tzu, who is more concerned with military strategy, Kautilya offers a theory which (1) is nested in a broader vision about statecraft. Concomitantly, it yields crucial insights into the political, societal, and economic implications of hybrid warfare; and (2) is anchored in a conceptual toolset and a methodology that are more adequate for capturing and comprehending the complexity of contemporary hybrid scenarios.

Leveraging India's Legacy

Besides its valence as a truly groundbreaking project on the Indian classics, such as Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, [Kamandaka's Nitisara](#), and [Thiruvalluvar's Kural](#), *Udbhav* can have important ramifications in terms of India's soft power. Modern governments have become increasingly aware of the significance of soft power as one of the key elements of strategic thinking. Ongoing conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine and the Israel-

Hamas conflict, have shown that successful strategy is not confined to the battlefield but is critically contingent upon the ability to effectively manage perceptions, cultivate goodwill, and win hearts and minds. The deliverables of *Udbhav* can contribute to meditation on the nature and function of future warfare by problematizing the nexus between India's soft power and new interpretations of the Indian classics. Thus, it is essential to consider the extent to which the ancient Indian legacy can be leveraged as an instrument of public/cultural diplomacy in India's gradual rise from a regional to a great power.

New readings of ancient texts feed into the Indian Government's mandate to generate a distinct strategic culture nurtured by India's age-old wisdom in statecraft and strategy as well as by the vision of [Atmanirbhar Bharat](#) (self-reliant India). The Indian Government has projected ancient philosophical ideas as a source of inspiration for the Indian Army to upgrade its strategic capabilities, tackle the challenges of future warfare, and communicate and work together with global partners. *Udbhav* can offer a valuable window into the implementation of [Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2021 directive to the armed forces](#) to eliminate obsolete practices, which have outlived their utility, and to the overall process of the decolonization/Indianization and modernization of various sectors, notably education, science, health, and defense.

Old Linkages, New Uses

Finally, it would be intriguing to draw links to similar ventures, notably the recent publication (2022) under the aegis of the Indian Army of the compendium [Paramparik Bhartiya Darshan...Ranniti aur Netriyta ke Shashwat Niyam](#) (Traditional Indian Philosophy... Eternal Rules of Warfare and Leadership), which includes a list of 75 *sutras* (maxims, aphorisms) emanating from Indian literature. This anthology is required reading for all of India's military ranks. It is a tangible example of how ancient doctrines can be integrated into contemporary military training and pedagogy.

One of *Udbhav's* main goals would be then to assess



how new uses of ancient learning will enable India to embrace a more comprehensive and holistic approach to security challenges and future warfare that takes into account and is tailored to the country's cultural particularities and geopolitical aspirations.

Relatedly, *Udbhav* can provide an additional platform for India's dialogue with other civilizations. A model of concentric circles with the Indian classics as its core and linkages to other traditions of strategic thought and statecraft (Greece, China, etc.) according to geographical, chronological, or thematic criteria could serve as a starting point for sustained reflection on how ancient Indian knowledge systems influenced world civilization. [The Indo-Greek case in particular exemplifies the power of interaction, demonstrating a merger of learning from both civilizations.](#) The [Indian and Greek classics contain a set of timeless principles of war and peacekeeping](#), which are specific to certain strands of political and strategic thought, but also offer scope for dialogue among diverse civilizations. Project *Udbhav* can cast new light on the ties and shared heritage between Indian and Greek civilizations as well as [India's and Greece's similar historical experiences](#) in the context of [both nations' commitment to democratic values and international law](#).

Note: An earlier version of this essay was presented at the [Indian Military Heritage Festival](#) on October 21, 2023. I pursued a comparative investigation of ancient Greek and Indian notions of soft power and hybrid warfare ([“Soft Power in Ancient Greek and Indian Political Thought: Xenophon and Kautilya”](#)) at the first workshop of *Udbhav* [“Comparative Perspectives on Ancient Greek and Indian Strategic Thought across West Asian Bridges”](#) (May 18, 2023). For further details, see [“Soft Power in Ancient Greek and Indian Political Thought: Xenophon and Kautilya”](#) and [“The Indian Classics and India's Role in the Global Arena,”](#) in [Udbhav: A Compendium of Activities and Events, 2023–24](#), ed. Pradeep Kumar Gautam, Anubhav Roy, and Saanjana Goldsmith (Delhi: Indian Army and Centre for Military History and Conflict Studies, United Service Institution of India, 2024), 20–21, 54–55; as well as my essay [“Ancient Greek and Indian Perspectives on Soft Power: Xenophon and Kautilya,”](#) [NRDC GR Herald: The Magazine of the NATO Rapid Deployment Corps–Greece](#) 23 (2025) (forthcoming). I incorporated some of the outcomes of my research on the Greek and Indian classics into the [Cognitive Warfare Course](#) at the Crisis Management and Disaster Response Centre of Excellence (Sofia, Bulgaria) (July 2024 & July 2023); the [NATO Strategic Communications Course 2023](#) at the Multinational Peace Support Operations Training Center of the Hellenic National Defence General Staff (September 2023); and the seminar [“Continuidad o discontinuidad en el espectro del conflicto”](#) at the Spanish Joint Staff College (March 9, 2022). The results of a side project on Mughal perceptions of IR are presented in my article [“The Mughal Experiment: The Indo-Islamic Legacy of Global IR,”](#) (August 8, 2023) (= “Indian IR Meets Global IR” Series, ed. Deepshikha Shahi and Raghav Dua). See also my op-ed [“How Ancient Greece influenced Indian strategic thought and statecraft,”](#) *The Sunday Guardian* (December 8, 2024).

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