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Dharma – Realpolitik Paradox:
India's Strategic Identity
to
Counter Chinese Challenges

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DHARMA – REALPOLITIK PARADOX: INDIA’S STRATEGIC IDENTITY TO COUNTER CHINESE CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The Dharma-Realpolitik Paradox explores India’s strategic identity as it balances moral imperatives rooted in dharma with pragmatic realpolitik to counter growing Chinese challenges. India’s foreign policy reflects a unique synthesis—prioritizing ethical diplomacy and democratic values while simultaneously asserting military and economic strength. This paradox becomes evident in its Indo-Pacific engagements, border posturing, and multilateral strategies. Confronting China’s assertiveness demands a careful blend of restraint and resolve. India's evolving strategic culture illustrates how ancient philosophical traditions and modern geopolitical realities shape its response to an increasingly complex regional environment.

Keywords: Indian Strategic Culture, China, Statecraft, Dharma-Realpolitik Paradox

A country that demands moral perfection in its foreign policy will achieve neither perfection nor security

—Henry Kissinger

Introduction

Strategic culture is a distinctive set of beliefs, attitudes and practices regarding the use of force, held by a collective and gradually arising through a unique protracted historical process (Longhurst, K. 2018). A strategic culture is persistent over time, tending to outlast the era of its inception, although it is not a permanent or static feature; instead, it is shaped and influenced by formative periods and can change, either fundamentally or piecemeal contingent upon the prevalent situation and geopolitics. Jack Snyder, also referred to as the ‘Father of Strategic Culture’ defined it as “sum total of ideals, conditional emotional responses and patterns of habitual behaviour that members of the national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation” (Snyder, J.L. 1977).

With the winding down of the Cold War, India started to recast its approach on Strategic Affairs. In order to analyse the same, the US Department of Defense (DoD) commissioned RAND Corporation to research on ‘India’s Strat Culture under George K. Tanham. His

influential finding, disseminated in an essay – *‘Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay’* brought out lucidly that India ‘lacked strategic culture’ while simultaneously highlighting limitations in strategic thinking in India; the fact that Indians were deliberately kept out of strategic circles by the British and lastly, to exhibiting very little interest in strategic planning by the elites was attributed to the lack of political unity in India. (Tanham, G. 1992) This was contradicted by Kanti Bajpai wherein he observed that ‘India lacking strategic culture is not altogether correct’ (Bajpai, K., 2002); owing primarily to the rich cultural lineage both in terms of religion (Mahabharata) as well as history (Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*). Since then, the debate about “Whether India possesses Strategic Culture or not?” has been an enticing one wherein both sides have propagated respective stances with numerous examples from India’s metamorphic journey— from independence to present.

It is imperative that at this juncture, we delineate between Dharma and Realpolitik approaches, both of which serve as pillars of India’s Strategic Culture. Dharmic approach draws its origin from ancient texts like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, where duty, righteousness and the cosmic order guide political decisions along with statecraft. While the core principle for governance under this approach remains- ‘righteousness underlined with ethical framework of morality’, the use of force is only justified for protecting Dharmic principles. It states that long term vision of statecraft becomes focussed towards ‘universal welfare and spiritual growth’, while alliances are forged on ‘trust and values’.

On the other hand, *Realpolitik* approach aligns more closely with Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*, where state interest, power dynamics and survival-based decision making are prioritised over righteousness. It prioritises national security, balance of power, and self-interest, often disregarding principles of moral considerations. Force remains a legitimate tool for achieving state goals whereas geopolitical dominance reinforced with strategic interests are recognised as the basic tenets of statehood.

The Indian strategic identity is a compelling study of contrasts, rooted in the ancient philosophical principles of dharma (righteous duty) and the contemporary imperatives of realpolitik (pragmatic statecraft). On one hand, dharma emphasises ethical conduct, long-term justice and a harmonious world order while on the other, realpolitik approach demands strategic manoeuvring, military preparedness and sometimes, moral compromises to ensure national survival and growth.

India and China—the two great Asian civilisations, share a relationship defined by both ‘collaboration and confrontation’. Historically, their exchanges spanned through the realms of trade, religion and culture. In the modern era, however, this dynamic is fraught with tension, marked by border disputes, economic competition and ideological divergence. While India aims to balance its dharmic legacy with the necessities of power politics, China's assertive policies—exemplified by initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and aggressive posturing along the Line of Actual Control (LAC)—complicates this balancing act.

This article explores the intricate interplay between Dharma and Realpolitik in India's strategic identity, with a particular focus on the challenges posed by China. By delving into historical foundations, analysing contemporary conflicts, and evaluating India's responses primarily in the geopolitical realm, it seeks to answer as to what should be the recommended strategy so as to primarily deal with the ‘Dragon lurking in the East’.

Historical Context: Dharma as India's Strategic Ethos or Realpolitik?

India's approach to statecraft has been profoundly influenced by the principle of ‘dharma’, which encompasses moral duty, justice and order. Rooted in ancient Indian philosophy, it provides a framework for ethical governance, emphasising the welfare of people and adherence to universal values. While it is often interpreted as a purely spiritual or moral concept, Indian thinkers have historically incorporated it into pragmatic statecraft.

- ***Dharma in Ancient Indian Statecraft.*** *Arthashastra* by Kautilya (Chanakya), one of India's seminal texts on governance, demonstrates how dharma was harmonised with realpolitik. Although the *Arthashastra* is often seen as a Machiavellian treatise (Bajpai, K., 2002), as it incorporates dharmic ideals such as the ruler's duty to protect subjects and promotes prosperity, Kautilya also advocates a balance between ethical governance and the use of force when necessary, illustrating an early example of reconciling dharma with realpolitik.
- ***Post-Independence India: The Nehruvian Approach.*** Post independence, India's foreign policy under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru reflected a strong inclination toward dharmic principles—Nehru championed non-alignment, anti-colonialism, and disarmament as part of a moral vision for global politics. Though this approach led to developing a unique image of the country at the global fora, the same left India

vulnerable to realpolitik challenges, most notably during the Sino-Indian War of 1962, wherein China's pragmatic aggression clashed with India's idealistic stance.

- ***Dharma and Realpolitik Gap.*** India's adherence to 'dharma' has often been criticised for hindering its 'realpolitik' based strategic autonomy. For instance, its reluctance to engage in power politics or assert territorial claims has occasionally been viewed as a sign of weakness. However, proponents argue that dharma ensures long-term stability and global respect, even if it complicates immediate responses to adversarial behaviour.
- ***Symbolic Set v/s Operational Set.*** Alastair Iain Johnson, while deliberating upon China's strategic thinking, argues that strategic culture could be broadly categorised into two — 'first, a symbolic or idealised set of assumptions and ranked preferences and second, an operational set that had a non-trivial effect on strategic choice (Johnston, A.I., 1998). In India's case, the policies related to *dharma* could be referred to the former while the ones linked to *realpolitik* thought process established a linkage with the latter.

Understanding China's Strategic Paradigm

While India's strategic approach has historically been guided by 'moral principles', China's statecraft is deeply rooted in the 'pragmatism of realpolitik'. This approach emphasises power dynamics, strategic advantage and the calculated pursuit of national interests. China's actions on the global stage are guided by a blend of philosophical traditions, such as Confucianism and strategic insights of Sun Tzu. Together, these formed a distinct paradigm that shapes China's geopolitical behaviour and starkly contrasts with India's ethos of an 'amalgamation of dharma and realpolitik'. The strategic foundations of China are based on three basic principles:

- ***Ethnocentrism.*** China's sense of cultural superiority derives from its history and the Chinese cultural narrative. Visitors from all over the globe, for centuries have observed that "China's sense of superiority was all-round, fundamental and cosmological given" (Terrill, R. 2003). Historically, the Chinese perceived their state as coinciding with the 'civilised world'— those who live beyond were categorised as "barbarians" (Cohen, W.I., 2008). Confucian ideology served as both— the expression of Chinese cultural superiority and the vehicle for enlightening the so-called barbarians dwelling outside

China's periphery, thus etching '*Ethnocentrism*' as a key feature of Chinese Strategic Culture (Booth, K., 1979).

- **'Middle Kingdom' or 'Tianxia' Concept.** Throughout much of its history, China saw itself as the core of a 'hierarchical international system', with tributary states arrayed around its periphery. As compared to the European state system, Chinese never traditionally concluded alliances with other states and maintained a hierarchical relation between the centre (China) and other peripheral states – as long as the latter observed and followed the hierarchy, there was little need for war (Twomey, C.P., 2006) thus reinforcing the 'Tianxia' concept.
- ***Yizhan, Jiji Fangyu and Ziwei Huanji.*** Chinese strategic culture is heavily influenced by the notion of 'righteous' or 'just war' (*Yizhan*). It still remains a crucial element of China's traditional approach to war; Confucius adopted the concept, and Mao later internalised it (Scobell, A., 2002). In addition, the strategic principle of 'active defence' (*jiji fangyu*) remains a cornerstone of Chinese strategy. While acknowledging the defensive nature, it allows for either a counterattack or a first strike if necessary. Using the concept of 'self-defence-counterattack' (*ziwei huanji*), China is more likely to engage in military pre-emption, prevention or coercion— as per discretion, thus highlighting that realpolitik dictates Chinese strategic thought process.

India-China Border Disputes: Clash of Paradigms

India-China border disputes are an enduring aspect of their bilateral relations, epitomising the clash between India's 'dharma and realpolitik influenced restraint' and China's 'realpolitik driven assertiveness'. These disputes, enmeshed with historical ambiguities and strategic assumptions, could be considered as an amalgamation of both viz. territorial conflicts as well as ideological confrontations between the two Asian Giants.

Paradox Debate: 1962 Sino-Indian War

The roots of India-China boundary disputes can be traced back to both 'border ambiguities' passed as a legacy to India from the British Empire along with 'Game of Map Manship' (Gupta, V.P. 1968)' as practiced by China. The 1962 Sino-Indian War marked the first major military confrontation between the two nations, thus exposing the vulnerabilities in India's strategic preparedness and the pitfalls of its dharma-oriented approach. India had sought to resolve the dispute through diplomacy as guided by its post-independence ethos, dictated

primarily by Mr. Nehru. In turn, China leveraged its superior military strategy of realpolitik, hence leading to a military debacle for India. The war reshaped India's strategic thinking, highlighting the limitations of moral high ground without adequate deterrence, leading to an inescapable requirement of a hybrid strategic culture of dharma and realpolitik. However, the moot question here remains: "If India had adopted realpolitik strategy instead of dharmic one while dealing with China right from the beginning, would it have still led to the humiliating defeat?" (Johnston, A.I. and Ross, R.S., 2006).

Analysis: Recent Conflicts

- ***Doklam Standoff (2017)***. The Doklam standoff near India-Bhutan-China tri-junction was a significant test of India's ability to counter Chinese aggression. China's attempt to build a road in the disputed region was seen as a strategic move to gain access to the Siliguri Corridor¹. India intervened on behalf of Bhutan pre-emptively, thus showcasing India's willingness to confront China militarily—a visible paradigm shift from India's earlier 'dharmic' to 'realpolitik' strategy which led to a diplomatic resolution of the standoff.
- ***Galwan Valley Clashes (2020)***. Recent clashes in the Galwan Valley marked a critical point in India-China relations. For the first time in decades, confrontation resulted in fatalities on both sides which was engineered primarily by the Chinese realpolitik paradigm. Again, Indian response was stronger in terms of both 'posturing' followed by execution of brilliant 'tactical actions', thus highlighting an apparent shift from India's earlier 'dharma based diplomatic resolution strategy' to 'realpolitik centred military actions'. This not only led to quashing of misplaced '*near invincible*' image of China on the global fora but also led to resolution of perceptual differences as well as demilitarisation by China at two disputed locations viz. Depsang and Demchok (Mapari, R., 2024).

Ideological Clash: *Dharma V/s Realpolitik*

The border disputes epitomise the dharma-realpolitik paradox:

- ***India's Approach***. India advocates for dialogue and mutual respect, often refraining from provocative actions that could escalate tensions (as observed during 1962 clashes). However, upon being pushed (Galwan clashes), showcasing of a strong military posture

followed by conduct of successful tactical operations in sensitive areas, is indicative of adoption of realpolitik strategy thus highlighting a 'Hybrid Approach'.

- **China's Stance.** China's aggressive actions reflect its realpolitik mindset, prioritising territorial gains and strategic advantage over ethical considerations.

India's Strategic Autonomy: Is It Relevant Now?

Strategic Autonomy could be defined as a 'nation's ability to undertake independent decisions towards its foreign as well as domestic policies while ensuring maintenance of sovereignty as well as flexibility' (Peri, D. 2024). Rooted in the principles of non-alignment, India has consistently sought to balance its relationships with global powers. It is debatable whether this approach, as rooted in the Nehruvian thought process, is an optimal one or not, given the complex geopolitical scene at present. However, it is pertinent to mention that while dealing with major powers, the paradox of both dharmic as well as realpolitik strategies comes into play.

- **With US.** Relations between India and US could be compared to an oscillating pendulum wherein initially the latter's inclination towards Pakistan was well established (up to late 90s) and then it got shifted towards India. India has strengthened ties with the US through defence agreements like Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) and the Security Agreement of 2018 (Bureau of Political-Military Affairs). India has been tactfully addressing this complex relationship by using a 'hybrid approach' (dharma and realpolitik) that suits the situation.
- **With Russia.** Due to the initial inclinations of US towards Pakistan, Russia was an 'all weather ally' for India which was proven multiple times in almost all conflicts between India and Pakistan. Despite western pressure, India continues to engage with Russia, particularly in defence and energy sectors, hence reflecting its commitment to maintaining a multipolar world. During the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War, India has managed to adopt a well-balanced stance, further highlighting its 'hybrid approach'.
- **Containing the Dragon.** India has exploited its relations with both superpowers (US and Russia) tactfully. While adopting the *realpolitik* stance, India is leveraging U.S on multiple levels including diplomatic as well as security alliances to keep China at bay in the Indian Ocean Region. Simultaneously, 'Russian Mediation' was effectively used

by India for resolution of the Galwan issue (Singh Chadha, S. 2024) post military clashes—highlighting employment of dharmic diplomacy strategy.

Balancing Act: South Asia

India faces unique challenges in South Asia wherein China has made significant inroads through economic investments and strategic partnerships.

- **Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh.** These nations form the inner circle as part of ‘**Mandala Theory**’ (Mishra, S. 2012) as enunciated in the ‘*Arthashastra*’. Though in the contemporary times, all these nations have been targeted by China as part of its ‘Debt-Trap Diplomacy’, India has undertaken multiple initiatives to counter the same in by clear diplomatic and economic actions. India is thus acting as per the dharmic imperatives of countering China’s influence while respecting the sovereignty of its neighbours.
- **Bhutan and Maldives.** India’s close ties with these nations reflect its commitment to fostering regional stability and resisting China’s encroachment (My Hai Loc, T., 2024). Both the nations possess Indian Military signatures, which China has attempted to disbalance the same on multiple occasions. India’s hybrid approach of both realpolitik bolstered with dharma has prevented the expansion of China’s influence in these countries.

Challenges: Balancing Dharma – Realpolitik Paradox

The Dharma – Realpolitik paradox, considering increased Chinese threat brings to fore multiple challenges for India, which are enumerated below:

- **Philosophical Discordance.** India’s traditional strategic culture focusses on dharmic principles comprising of morality, non-aggression and adherence to international norms. In contrast, China often adopts realpolitik approach which manifests into aggressive actions while prioritising national interest over ethical considerations. Hence, this precarious situation gives rise to an inescapable requirement of juxtaposing moral principles with power-based strategies for Indian policymakers.
- **Border Disputes.** The unresolved border issues, including Doklam standoff and clashes in Galwan, test India's ability to combine dharmic principles with realpolitik assertiveness while refraining from using a purely realpolitik approach.

- **China-Pakistan Collusivity.** China's collusivity with Pakistan in both military (Lalwani, S.P. 2023) as well as non-military realms exacerbates the existing strategic complications for India.
- **China's Growing Influence in Indian Ocean region.** Balancing dharma-inspired diplomatic initiatives with realpolitik driven strategies poses a major challenge, given the rising influence of China in the Indian Ocean Region.
- **Trade Imbalance.** Indian economic dependence on Chinese imports, which include electronics, steel and solar equipment (Dutta Mishra, R., 2024) limits India's ability to adopt realpolitik inspired initiatives as the same could lead to economic criticalities.
- **Multilateral Platforms.** India encounters a dharmic challenge while maintaining moral high ground as well as simultaneously countering China's increasing influence in forums like BRICS, SCO and RCEP.
- **Military and Strategic Alliances.** While engaging with the US-led QUAD, India faces a major challenge to tactfully maintain strategic autonomy while adhering to the dharmic principles and simultaneously avoiding to become a tool of great power rivalry under the realpolitik strategy so as to ensure that the Indian Ocean Region is kept as a free, open and prosperous region (Lieberthal, K.G., 2011).
- **Perception Management.** India, while projecting itself as a benign power, with focus on cultural and democratic values leads to a direct perceptual conflict with China which overtly employs economic and military tools to coerce smaller nations. Balancing this paradox requires India to bolster its hard power global image under the realpolitik domain without undermining its dharmic soft power appeal (Jaishankar, D., 2018).
- **Internal Dynamics.** Indian polity encounters multiple challenges while tackling diverse and conflicting views on selecting a modus operandi to deal with China, with some advocating a hardline stance (realpolitik) and others urging restraint and dialogue (dharma).

Recommendations

India's quest for strategic identity in the face of China's growing assertiveness, reflects a delicate balancing act between dharma and realpolitik with the underlying need to secure its national interests in a complex global environment. As China continues to expand its global assertiveness through economic, military and diplomatic means, India finds itself at crossroads,

highlighting the dilemma between adoption of ‘realpolitik driven hard stance’ vis-à-vis ‘dharma motivated diplomatic solutions’. Given below are certain recommended initiatives which could be adopted by India:

Initiatives: The Dharmic Approach

- ***Engaging with South Asian Countries.*** Reinforcing ties with ASEAN countries and neighbours like Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka with an aim to counterbalance China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), by undertaking diplomatic as well as economic driven initiatives (Khan, T.A., 2023).
- ***Diplomatic Engagement of China.*** Engagement of China in diplomatic dialogues to diffuse border disputes and prevent escalation, while flagging clearly identified redlines, with an aim to keep the Chinese border aggression contained.
- ***Encourage Regional Economic Partnerships.*** Active participation by India in trade-based agreements to include Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) (PTI, 2024) with allies for counterbalancing Chinese dominated forums like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).
- ***Effective Utilisation of Soft Power.*** Employment of India's Soft Power to include Yoga, Buddhism as well as Bollywood to strengthen India's global image as a peaceful and inclusive nation while enhancing and bolstering its global cultural reach.
- ***Expand International Influence.*** Increase in India's participation in global institutions like UN, WTO and WHO is likely to assert India's perceptions on international norms and regulations. In addition, leveraging diplomatic relations with US, Russia, France and UK to lobby for Permanent Membership of UN Security Council (UNSC) (Tiwari, P., 2024) is likely to go a long way to counter China on the global forum.

Initiatives: The Realpolitik Approach

- ***Strengthen Alliances.*** Deepening partnerships with democracies such as the United States, Japan and Australia, through alliances like QUAD remain pivotal to contain China's growing assertiveness.
- ***Enhance Border Defence.*** Modernising infrastructure in border areas, including lines of communication, airstrips, and surveillance systems, particularly in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, is likely to bolster India's defence capability in disputed areas.

- **Military Modernisation.** There arises an inescapable requirement of military modernisation by India. Though multiple initiatives have been undertaken, a lot needs to be accomplished under this vertical. In addition, enhancing indigenous capability as part of 'Atmanirbharta' (Singh, G. 2023) also would reduce India's dependence on other countries as well as make us self-reliant.
- **Controlling Strategic Economic Sectors.** Safeguarding critical sectors like telecommunications, data infrastructure and technology from Chinese influence by tightening economic and commerce regulations is again imperative in order to ensure prevention of Chinese intrusion into critical sectors.
- **Leveraging Tibet and Taiwan.** Leveraging the Tibetan issue, including support for the Dalai Lama and Tibetan government-in-exile would act as a force multiplier. However, the same needs to be done tactfully and selectively without antagonising Beijing. In addition, strengthening ties with Taiwan in areas like trade, technology as well as joint military training would again prove to be a 'gamechanger'.

The Road Ahead: A Balanced Vision

India's strategic culture is non-monolithic, almost like a mosaic thus making it more distinct and coherent than that of most nation-states. Looking ahead, India's strategic identity will continue to evolve in response to the shifting global dynamics. India's future success will depend on its ability to balance its dharmic commitments with realpolitik complexities of the world order where power dynamics are rapidly changing. In this context, India must remain vigilant in maintaining a robust defence posture while simultaneously strengthening its diplomatic ties, as well as asserting its just image on the global stage. India's challenge will be to remain steadfast in pursuing its dharmic principles while leveraging its growing power in concert with realpolitik strategy. The pursuit of peace, justice, and mutual respect must continue to guide India's actions, while maintaining its hard stance to secure its future demands underlined with both strategic flexibility as well as pragmatism. Thus, the need of the hour is to follow a 'Dynamic-Hybrid Approach' which would shape India's role as a key player in shaping the future global order, one that is a true reflection of both — its values as well as power.

The state is a fragile organization, and the statesman does not have the moral right to risk its survival on ethical restraint

—Henry Kissinger

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