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Bertil Haggman  
bertilhaggman@hotmail.com

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# The Classical Way of Conflict—Civilizational Reflections on Ancient Statecraft

Bertil Haggman  
bertilhaggman@hotmail.com

## 1. Introduction

In a recent book (*The Modern Prince – What Leaders Need to Know Now*, Yale University Press, 2003), Professor Carnes Lord has pointed out that statecraft today suffers from the absence of an adequate theory. This is a problem as we today live in a dangerous world in need of good leadership. “...The concept of statecraft is rarely analyzed carefully or brought into relationship with the idea of leadership” [Lord, 23].

In our day, the term *statecraft* is almost exclusively used to define diplomacy or the conduct of foreign policy. Like war strategy, however, statecraft is “an art coping with an adversarial environment in which actions generate reactions in unpredictable ways and chance and uncertainty rule. Like strategy, too, statecraft is also an art of relating means to ends...Statecraft must be concerned both with the goals a nation pursues and with the ways and means necessary to achieve them.” [Lord, p. 24] Far more important, it has a broader meaning, namely the way visions are implemented.

The Middle East in the future will be one of the battlegrounds to establish free societies. The Arab Muslim countries in this conflict-ridden area have been in upheaval since the 1980s. In expectation of coming challenges in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is important for the West to draw from older historical experiences to understand the thinking on statecraft of classical civilizations, including Islam.

In Islamic societies, social and political relations have been and are marked by intrigue, deception, and internal conflict. Actions of countries such as Syria and Iran (and Iraq in the past) must be seen in the light of these traditions.

## 2. The Role of Niccoló Machiavelli (1468 – 1527) in Statecraft

Few Western writers on political philosophy have had such an impact on Western statecraft as Niccoló Machiavelli. He broke with the tradition of scholastic thought and was a pioneer in the field of political science. Machiavelli, who based much of his thinking on such classical authors as Xenophon, Livy, and Cicero, had an interest in resolving the demands of transcendent morality while addressing the requirements of power politics. He believed in policy that was ruthless and pragmatic, but not amoral. Virtue, (originally from *vir*, “man”), to him meant “valor,” “ability,” “ingenuity,” and “prowess.”

Machiavelli believed that there could be a pagan virtue, which was a public virtue, and a Judeo-Christian virtue, mostly a private virtue. Deception was allowed for the well-being of the state.

Since the 1960s, comparative analysis has emerged of Machiavelli’s doctrine and doctrines of the classical era. The Arthashastra of Kautilya (the Indian classical power theorist) and Chinese legalists such as Lord Shan, Han Fei Tzu, and others, are examples. In many instances, there is a remarkable similarity among these early classical thinkers and Machiavelli in approaching the realistic pursuit of worldly power. The Indian Brahmin, Chanakya Kautilya, like Machiavelli in *The Prince*, addressed his manual to his sovereign.

## 3. Islam

When Islam established an imperial government in Baghdad, they used the Persian Sasanian Empire as an organizational model (3<sup>rd</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, and Zoroastrian in faith). The statecraft of this empire offered a bureaucracy, an effective military system, diplomacy, and intelligence.

Muslim rulers studied available documentation, especially the 10<sup>th</sup>-century *Book of Kings* (the epic *Shahnameh*). Another central work was *The Mirror for Princes*, which had been

prepared for instruction of rulers and ministers. An important element in the preservation of the empire was intelligence gathering—the work of spies spread throughout the empire.

The Sasanian Empire was a Persian “power state.” *The Book of Government (Seyasat-Nameh)* by Nizam al-Mulk (d. 1092 AD) was prepared to help sustain fundamentalist Islam, but the origin of the work was completely Iranian.

The author, whose title means “Regulator of the Kingdom,” was trained in Iranian bureaucracy and later rose to the positions of Vizir and Grand Vizir. He was in actuality the ruler of the Seljuq Dynasty for 30 years.

Nizam al-Mulk firmly believed in centralized rule. Being of Sunni faith, he tried to suppress the dissident Shiite sects, and their spin-off, the Order of the Assassins. A network of schools to counter Shiite propaganda was created.

Essential to the state was a strong army. This was to carry out the everlasting expansionist strategy supported by a totally reliable intelligence service (*barid*). To create a trusted *barid*, a good system of communication was of utmost importance:

“It is the king’s duty to enquire into the condition of his peasantry and army, both far and near, and to know more or less how things are. If he does not do this, he is at fault and people will charge him with negligence, laziness and tyranny, saying: ‘Either the king knows about the oppression and extortion going on in the country, or he does not know.’”

He goes on to say that if the king knows, but does nothing about it, he an oppressor and acquiesces in oppression. However if he does not know, he is negligent and ignorant. Since these two options are bad, he needs to have postmasters (informers); kings need to know everything that is going on, good or bad.

For instance, he says, if anybody wrongly took so much as a chicken or a bag of straw from another (and that five hundred farsangs away) the king would know about it and have the

offender punished, so that others knew that the king was vigilant. When vigilant, the subjects enjoy security and justice and are free to pursue trade and civilization.

### ***3.1 Informers***

Recognizing the danger of having informers, he notes: “But this is a delicate business involving some unpleasantness; it must be entrusted to the hands and tongues and pens of men who are completely above suspicion and without self-interest, for the weal or woe of the country depends on them.”

These informers must be directly responsible to the king alone, and must receive monthly salaries (so that money is not a temptation). This guarantees that the king knows of every event and is able to act with rewards and punishments appropriately.

The subjects will thus respect and fear such a king and will not disobey or plot mischief. It is this way that intelligence agents contribute to the justice and vigilance of a king and help make the country prosper.

### ***3.2 Rebellions and Mischief***

A danger to a king is the possibility of governors, assignees, officers, and army commanders who have planned rebellion and plotted mischief. It is only through spies, sent everywhere in the kingdom and disguised as merchants, travelers, Sufis, peddlers, and beggars who can report these things that the king, can take immediate action. Such spies also protect a king from unexpected plans to attack by foreign kings. They also bring news, good or bad, about conditions among the peasants so that the king could give this attention. (Kritzek, pp. 154 – 157)

Most importantly, however, the Grand Vizir focused on foreign policy and diplomacy. Foreign ambassadors must be watched from the moment they cross the country’s borders. There must be advanced notice to the king of who is coming, for what purpose, and how large is their entourage and baggage. It is important to recognize that ambassadors are trained to be keen

observers, so they function as intelligence agents as well as bearers of messages from another king. In fact they want to know about the state of roads, mountain passes, rivers and grazing grounds, to see whether an army can pass or not; where fodder is available and where not; who are the officers in every place: what is the size of that king's army and how well it is armed and equipped, and particularly what is the nature of the king and how loyal or disaffected are his subjects.

No matter what the relationship between kings, ambassadors must be treated with the utmost courtesy and be accorded hospitality by all officials along their route. (Kritzek, pp. 154–157).

*The Book of Government* was written shortly before the assassination of the author. Most likely this was by an agent for the Order of the Assassins. This agent most likely had some rival of the Grand Vizir as accomplice. The sultan was also soon killed and the empire disintegrated.

Nizam al-Mulk had predicted that since the sultan abandoned *barid* reasoning, he created an atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion amongst friends and foes. This in turn resulted in a less vigorous check on rebellion, injustice, and on other threats to the empire.

Looking back on the statecraft of the Iranian-based empire, it seems obvious that the greatest problem was too much centralization and too much military expansion. This led to the typical model of rise, expansion, contraction, and decay. Continuing the centralized system was one of the main reasons for the continuing decline of Islam between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Similar processes can be observed in secular Arab states today, such as Syria and Iraq (before liberation in 2003) and in present-day theocratic Iran.

Centralization is a continuing danger for these states. They are all built on antiquated failing structures and the inability to change into modern and effective states.

#### **4. Classical India**

Hindu rule, especially in the context of the present government of India, is more of a balancing force than that of the Middle East. This has been well understood by the United States and India.

The artha doctrine and practices are those of *Kautilya*, who was a Brahmin counselor of Chandragupta Maurya (born 340 BC, died about 290 BC). Indian society, although partly modernized in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has remained to a great extent a state similar to pre-Christian society. Achemenid Persia influenced the Indian Maurya state, thus establishing an Indian-Persian link of statecraft. Persian thinking, therefore, played an essential role.

The classical Indian literature in the field can be found in the Arthasastras (of which *Kautilya* is the foremost), the Dharmasastras, the Laws of Manu, the Mahabharata (the national epic), the Ramayana, and a number of didactic animal fables.

The general consensus of these writings in the domain of artha (politics, economics, diplomacy and war) is that only winning counts. Artha, however, is only one version of the philosophy of life.

Basic rules are that no human being can ever be trusted, enemies are everywhere and the king must be able to differentiate between a large number of different kinds of battles, intrigues and groups of troubles, and obstructions.

##### **4.1 Espionage and Covert Action**

Kingdoms have deep roots to a great extent in espionage and covert action. A Maurya palace was structured with images, secret and underground passages, hollow pillars, hidden

staircases and collapsible floors. The king changed his living-quarters daily (compare Saddam Hussein during the time before the liberation of Iraq in 2003 and until his capture). In the kitchens, a multitude of tasters worked. The demeanor of all persons was carefully noted.

“Aroused by music at the end of the sixth nocturnal hour, he [the king] receives the salutations of his counselors, and interviews the doctors and kitchen officials; then he reflects on the principles of polity and forms his plans, after which he sends out his secret emissaries, and hears reports of his military and financial advisers. Next comes the hour for appearing in the Audience Hall or in the Law Courts, and considering the affairs of the public...” [Rapson, 444 f.]

#### **4.2 Foreign Policy**

An important part of foreign policy was the doctrine of *mandala*. According to this theory, a kingdom can be both ally and enemy, depending on their geographical position with regard to a would-be conqueror. Natural enemies are the closest neighbors; natural friends are in the adjoining circle. The king must consider especially the dominant king, the one with the capacity to fight without allies.

It should be noted that in Hindu Indian history, many cases exist when two kingdoms allied to encircle and destroy kingdoms between them. After that, the former “friend” emerged automatically as the next target. It is, however, also clear that this geometry of balance was never absolutely certain. Thus an endless game similar to chess emerges in which every player is expected to improve his status.

In Book VII of *Arthashastra*, there are six major instruments to advance. Each instrument has subdivisions. Paramount is the policy of war, *danda*. The opposite, peace, of course, involves negotiations and conciliation, which are games of deceit and trickery, games of illusions. Thus in the old Hindu statecraft war is seen as follows:



“The whole world stands in awe of the king ready to strike. If you have no power, you are a conquered king. Only rulers who have no other remedy should seek peace. Only weakness calls for conciliation and alliances. Like a snake devouring a mouse, the Earth devours a king who is inclined to peace.” [Arthasastra, Book 7].

“As a fowler, carefully uttering cries similar to those of the birds he wishes to seize or kill, captures, and brings them under his power, even so should a king bring his foes under subjection and then slay them if he likes.

Without trusting one’s foe in reality, one should behave as if one trusts him completely.

Speak soft words before you smite and while you smite the foe...by a sudden pitched battle, by poison, by corrupting his allies, by gift of wealth, by any means you should destroy your foe.

The enemy should be broken into fragments like an earthen jar on a rock.” [Arthasastra, Books 6-14].

### **4.3 Intrigue and Espionage**

The concept of the enemy/foe is important as is intrigue and espionage. These are the main unifying factors. The key to successful intrigue is espionage. This idea reaches back to the *Rig Veda*, where the god Varuna is described as surrounded by spies in court proceedings.

Hindu kings had internal spies for every contingency and in every disguise: recluse, householder, merchant, ascetic, classmate, colleague, firebrand, prisoner, beggar woman, etc. “Government based on Deceit” and “Battle of Intrigue” are important headings in the *Arthasastra*.

External spying was just as important. Foreign spies would be best dealt with if they were seduced by female spies and then murdered. When sending spies to another kingdom, it was mainly to sow dissension, seek information, and encourage “wild tribes” to devastate the enemy country for payment. So-

called “fiery spies” were among the first guerrillas of world history. They were sent to destroy supply stores and granaries armed with weapons, fire, and poison, to set fires, and to demoralize the people [Arthasastra, Book 12, Ch. 4].

Most favored among the operators were “shaven heads” (monks or holy men). They had license to kill and conspire in holy places where the enemy worshipped or was on pilgrimage. The diplomats were integrated into the “system,” being “open spies.”

The agents were directed by a regular department of espionage. Much of the Hindu system might seem immoral today, but it is an important key to actions of today’s outlaw states in these fields. This is not to claim that historic India was an outlaw state or that today’s India in any extensive way is influenced by the classical system of statecraft. The system has, however, had an influence on South Asian states in the area.

## **5. Classical China**

The most outstanding of the Legalists (practitioners of statecraft) in ancient China was Lord Shang (or Shang Yang). He probably died in 338 BC and served Duke Hsiao of Ch’in. One of the fundamental policies of Lord Shang was the organization and maintenance of a strong army. In foreign policy the Chinese Legalists accepted the practice of deception (compare Machiavelli).

Hsun Tzu (298 - 238 BC) was influenced by Lord Shang and held that “the nature of man is evil, and his goodness is acquired,” which influenced later Legalist disciples such as Han Fei (d. 233 BC) and Li Szu (d. 208 BC), who further developed the teachings of Shang Yang both in theory and practice.

Ideologically, the strongest bond between the Legalists and Machiavelli seems to be their common basic view of the depravity of human nature:

Thus men never behave well, unless they are obliged; wherever a choice is open to them and they are free to do as they like, everything is immediately filled with confusion and disorder. – Men are more prone to evil than to good.

## **6. Conclusion—Cunning, Simulation and Ruse**

Taking a concluding look at Machiavellian, Classical Indian, Chinese, Islamic, and Persian statecraft, there are both similarities and differences. In modern China, for example, one can claim that Confucianism and Taoism are as strong influences as is Legalism.

An interesting comparative detail is that of Chinese “te” (sometimes transliterated “de”). In Taoism, it has the same meaning as “virtue” in the classical Latin sense (“manliness,” “valor,” or “worth;” compare “virtue” in Machiavelli’s works). For Taoists, “te” was immanence of Tao in the individual, a kind of charismatic power, while in Confucianism, “te” was an ethical concept close to goodness.

Classical Islamic statecraft can be said to be a central part of the statecraft of the modern rogue regimes of Iran and Syria.

Societies in the Middle East such as Syria, Iran and Iraq (under Saddam Hussein) are inherently unstable. There are intrigues, cruel purges among factions, religious uprisings, and pugnacious foreign policy. Historically, sects have been a problem in the area—such as the Wahhabis on the Arabian Peninsula and the Order of Assassins (the Old Man of the Mountain) with its main base on the territory of present day Iran.

Classical statecraft in the countries of the Middle East, but also in India and China, has stressed cunning, simulation, and ruse.

Especially in two areas in the field of statecraft, diplomacy and negotiations, the classical Islamic, Indian and Chinese strategies were to out-flank your opponent, seeking ultimate triumph. In such a system, there is not much room for conciliation, confidence, and fair-dealing. A treaty concluded is

regarded as a weakness of the opponent, which must at once be exploited to prepare for further triumphs.

In coming years, if the United States under certain conditions will start negotiations with Tehran and Damascus, it is important to keep in mind their Islamic heritage in negotiations and diplomacy. In the case of India and China, classical statecraft of the kind that was part of their ancient civilizations is no longer a dominant part of the strategy of the modern state. India is a democratic state influenced by modern western statecraft. In the case of China, the classical legalists have a certain remaining influence, but if so, it is combined with similar Communist techniques in negotiations and diplomacy.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Italian Machiavelli, in his work *The Prince*, suggested similar tactics and strategy as did the ancient writers of China and India. But it is important to remember that Machiavelli had patriotic motives. He had observed how Italy had been overrun by the French, plundered by them, and insulted. It was necessary to unite the city-states of Italy and forge a strong state, in short—to liberate Italy.

The liberator of Italy, the addressee of *The Prince*, could not count on a spontaneous following of all Italians. He had to pursue a policy of steel and poison, of murder and treachery. The Italian republican cities had to be destroyed: Thus, a new prince, in a city or country taken by him, must make everything new.

Machiavelli, however, left unanswered in *The Prince* how new modes and orders could be maintained throughout the ages. That answer was given in his later work, *Discourses*. Thus there is a difference between Machiavelli and the Asian classics of statecraft. The latter recommended policies of cunning, simulation and ruse; the purpose was to keep a ruler in power by violent means if necessary.

The Italian master of statecraft recommended violent and deceptive methods to revolutionize Italy for its protection against foreign invaders. He wanted to change and create new

modes and orders from an anarchical system of small city-states, unable to defend themselves against foreign military invasions.

It is important to extend research on the history of statecraft in ancient times and relate it to present day leadership. This would be of interest to those developing a forward strategy on behalf of the West.

The study of civilization and culture play an important role in statecraft. Civilizational study on a grand comparative scale can contribute to improved strategic intelligence. It can be the key to successful statecraft in foreign affairs. An understanding of the value systems of other civilizations and cultures can profoundly contribute to improvement of policies, not only in the benevolent hegemonic United States, but in the rest of the West as well.

*This article is partly inspired by the writings of a here unnamed American professor, now deceased, who pointed me in the right direction.*

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