
CONTEXTUALIZING LESSONS ON PUBLIC LEADERSHIP IN KAUTILYA'S ARTHSHAstra AND SUN TSU'S THE ART OF WAR: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

DR CHANDNI SENGUPTA¹

Abstract

Public leadership is a popular theme of discussion in the world of politics and public sphere at large. It encompasses a set of activities and interactions that people in positions of power engage in. The famous Greek philosopher Aristotle once opined that a government should be based on laws and not men, yet men can never be factored out of the equation of governance. As is evident from many democracies in the world today, politics is extremely 'personalized' in nature, i.e. the people or the leaders who run the state are the key players in the political system. This is, however, not a modern phenomenon. In ancient times, the entire system of governance used to revolve around the aura of the King. Public leadership in ancient times, therefore, was centred on the leadership traits of the King. Scholars in the past have been engaged in a lively debate on what it means to be a leader. From politics to management, the realm of leadership forms an extensive study of academic research. This paper will attempt to make a comparative analysis on public leadership lessons espoused in two ancient texts spanning two civilizations—Kautilya's The Arthshastra and Sun Tsu's The Art of War. While the former is considered to be a treatise on politics and economics, the latter is essentially a work military treatise focussing on leadership in war. In this paper, the component of leadership in both the texts shall be evaluated in order to analyse the differences and similarities in perspective.

Keywords: Leadership, Public, War, General, King, People, Society

¹ *Historian, Independent Researcher, and Author*

The concept of leadership is diverse in nature and in empirical studies, the term 'leadership' is applied to varied roles including a committee leader, business executive, politician, head of state, among others. However, the term 'public leadership' clearly implies a leadership role that entails public outreach, and is applicable in the context of public management and politics. In the case of the latter, it is more often than not seen through the prism of political governance embedded in a certain leader or set of leaders. In modern democracies, public leadership is largely centred on the Head of State, the Cabinet of Ministers and the Policies which are formulated to govern. If we are to look at the ancient period, it would be evident that public leadership in that phase of history was also focussed on the King, his cabinet and the policies formulated by the ruler for his subjects. It is, therefore, apparent that the basic tenets of public leadership have not undergone a drastic change. In democracies, an elected leader has replaced the King, the cabinet of ministers continues to be in existence and public policy is still considered to be a key aspect of governance.

The study of public leadership in ancient times would not be possible without a textual analysis of treatises written in that era. These treatises can be considered as handbooks for instructing Kings in the art of governance. Two such treatises spanning two different ancient civilizations became the most popular texts on leadership and governance. Kautilya's *The Arthshastra* and Sun Tsu's *The Art of War* have captured the imagination of scholars over many decades. While political scientists have delved into the aspect of political leadership elaborated in these texts, management experts have worked on the management strategies detailed in these two texts. For the purpose of this paper, the focus shall remain on public leadership from the standpoint of politics.

In order to make a comparative analysis between the two texts, it is imperative to understand the nature of these texts. In ancient times, many texts were written on the qualities of a King, his leadership traits, and the value of good governance. The most significant text of this genre which is considered to be an instructional manual on governance and leadership is *The Arthshastra* composed by Kautilya, the famous minister of King Chandragupta Maurya (317-293 BC). Kautilya or Chanakya, as he is popular known as, was a teacher at the world's oldest university, Takshashila and later became one of the main advisers of King Chandragupta Maurya. Many scholars have credited Chandragup-

ta's rise to power as a result of his extensive reliance on the strategies of Kautilya who is said to have played a key role in devising strategies to overthrow the Nanda Dynasty and establishing the Mauryan Dynasty. He also served Chandragupta Maurya's son and successor, Bindusara.

Kautilya's *The Arthshastra* was a text intentioned to instruct the King on matters of governance. In the preface to the text, Kautilya clearly mentions that he wrote the text as a guide for 'those who govern.' (Zysk, 1987). Kautilya's *The Arthshastra* emphasises the need for political realism. It considers the State to be supreme. The State is led by the King who works on the principle of *dharma* and carries out his duty towards his subjects and for the welfare of the state. Kautilya's *The Arthshastra* is variously interpreted by scholars. According to A.L. Basham the text is a "treatise on polity." G.P. Singh has also labelled it as a "science of polity." (Singh, 1993, p.7). D.D. Koshambi has called it a "science of material gain." (Koshambi, 1997, p.14). R.P. Kangle has described *The Arthshastra* as a "science of politics which was written in order to help the king in acquiring and protecting the earth." Some scholars have also interpreted *The Arthshastra* as a "science of political economy."

The second text which has been taken up for analysis is *The Art of War* written by Sun Tsu around 500 BC. Sun Tsu was a Military General and master strategist who lived in Chinese province of Qi. He was born into a family of experts on military and political affairs. He is supposed to have participated in many military campaigns and rose to the rank of a General under the Wu Dynasty. Sun Tsu's *The Art of War* offers a framework for waging wars. It also presents valuable insights into the nature of battle and the strategies to win at war. However, the text is also a classic exposition on the principles of public leadership.

Sun Tsu's *The Art of War* has exercised considerable influence over modern Chinese politics. It has been an important manual throughout various phases of Chinese political and military history. However, *The Art of War* cannot be considered as just a manual on military strategies, it is also considered to be an important treatise on diplomacy and statecraft.

Approaches to Public Leadership and Attributes of a King

There are various approaches to public leadership. Four can be demarcated as the main approaches which form the basis of the theoretical framework on leadership.

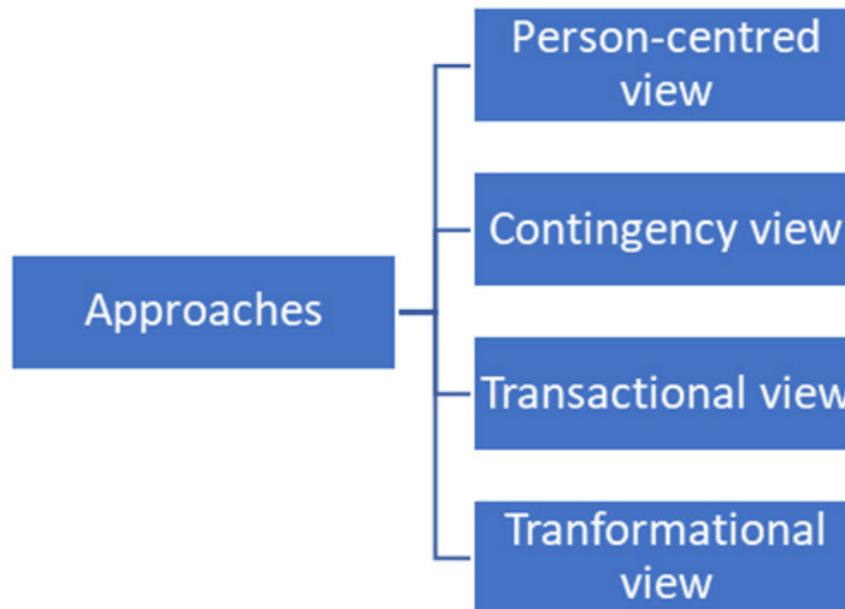


Figure 1: Approaches to Public Leadership

The person-centred view focusses on the individual characteristics of a leader. These include behavioural traits and styles. This theory espouses that certain individuals differ from others in terms of their person qualities and tend to become leaders no matter the circumstance or situation. The second view is the contingency view which assumes that leaders do have specific kinds of qualities but these qualities manifest themselves only in certain conducive situations. These are the two main traditional approaches to leadership. In the 1950s and 1960s, there was a paradigm shift in the way leadership had been viewed in the past.

Leadership came to be seen in terms of psychological processes and social exchange. (Hollander, 1958; French & Raven, 1960). According to this theory, group members agree to follow leaders in return for certain rewards. The members confer respect, obedience and admiration on the leader. According to this view, leadership is purely transactional in nature. From the 1970s onwards, scholars have attempted to debunk the myth of transactional leadership, and have focussed on transformational or charismatic leadership. According to this theory, leaders are able to appeal to common people because of their emphasis on higher ideals and values. (French (Jr.) and Raven, 1960).

An in-depth analysis of *The Arthshastra* and *The Art of War* point towards three theories on leadership, i.e. the person-centred view, the contingency or situational view and the transformational view. However, it must be kept in mind that *The Arthshastra* is a text which elaborates on the attributes of a King within the socio-political structure while *The Art of War* essentially focuses on the role of a Military General on the battlefield. The person-centred approach is elucidated in *The Arthshastra*. A King is supposed to be someone who combines the virtues of *Prabhu Shakti* (vision), *Mantra Shakti* (mission) and *Utsah Shakti* (motivation).

Kautilya's *The Arthshastra* states that "In the happiness of his subjects lies his own happiness; in their welfare, his welfare." A king should be well trained and practice self-control. An ideal king is one who has the highest qualities of leadership, intellect, energy, and personal attributes and behaves like a sage monarch, i.e. a *Rajarishi* (*The Arthshastra*, 6.1.2-6) A *Rajarishi* has self-control and has overcome the inimical temptations of the senses. He develops his intellect by associating with elders, keeps his eyes open through spies, is ever active in promoting the security and welfare of the people, ensures the observance of by the people of their dharma by authority and example, improves his own discipline by learning in all branches of knowledge, and endears himself to his people by enriching them and doing good to them. (Rangarajan, 1992, p.145). Among other things, *Rajarishi* is one who is ever active in promoting *yogakshema*, *yoga* meaning the successful accomplishment of an objective and *kshema* meaning its peaceful enjoyment by the people. Kautilya states that "The king's attitude towards his people should be like that of a father towards his children, particularly when any danger threatened the population." (*The Arthshastra*, 4.3.43) The benevolent nature of the King is apparent in this verse.

As far as the situational or contingency view is concerned, the adaptive nature of a King's actions is clearly mentioned by Kautilya. He states that a king must "Have foresight to avail himself of the opportunities by choosing the right time, place and type of action." (*The Arthshastra*, 6.1.2-6) A King must, therefore, adapt to the situation and know when to fight and when to make peace.

The charisma of the King is unequivocally expressed in many passages of the *The Arthshastra*. In one such passage, Kautilya states that "If the King is energetic, his subjects will be equally energetic. If he is slack, the subjects will also be lax, and thereby eat into his wealth. Besides a lazy king will easily fall

into the hands of his enemies. Hence, the king should himself always be energetic.” (Rangarajan, 1992, p.147). The transformational theory based on the charisma of the King or ruler is evident in this passage. The King is required to maintain high ideals and values through which he can command respect and maintain his leadership.

The *Art of War* gives a detailed account of the personal attributes of a leader. While describing the ideal qualities of a leader, Sun Tsu pronounces two major qualities—humaneness and enlightenment. Since the *Art of War* is a military treatise, the main emphasis is on the role of the Military General during a war situation. The text states that “the General is the bulwark of the state. If the bulwark is complete at all points, the state will be strong; if the bulwark is defective, the state will be weak.”

Sun Tsu states that a general must possess five attributes: wisdom, trustworthiness, benevolence, courage, and firmness. (Dimovski et al. 2012). The most important personal attribute of a leader, according to Sun Tsu is wisdom. Therefore, according to Sun Tsu only wisdom can set a person apart from another and make one stand out as a leader. The Chinese concept of wisdom is similar to the Indian concept of wisdom which emphasises that wisdom can be acquired through continuous study and practice, unlike the Western notion of intelligence which is primarily based on the idea of heredity and is a non-malleable concept.

Sun Tsu also stresses on contingency or strategic situationalism in the text. Here, it is important to elaborate on the Chinese concept of *Shi* which stands for situation and *Yin Shi* which means situational adaptation. The Chinese concept of *Shi* can also be understood in terms of force, position or momentum. In *The Art of War*, Sun Tsu has devoted an entire chapter to *Shi*. According to Sun Tsu, it is the duty of the leader to create a position *Shi* relative to the opponent in order to defeat the opponent. Therefore, it is elaborated that the advantage in the battlefield is not necessarily available but can be and must be created by a good leader.

The transformational approach is evident from one passage in *The Art of War* which states that “When one treats people with benevolence, justice and righteousness, and reposes confidence in them, the army will be united in mind and all will be happy to serve their leader.” The charisma of the leader and his benevolent and just approach is therefore paramount in dealing with his army.

Kautilya's *The Arthashastra* and Sun Tsu's *The Art of War* are similar in their approach as far as the personality traits of the leader are concerned. The concept of the sage king or *Rajarishi* pronounced by Kautilya is based on the notion of wisdom. In *The Art of War*, wisdom is treated as the most important characteristic of a leader. Hence, as far as the personal traits of a leader are concerned, there are marked similarities in the two texts. The concept of benevolence is also pronounced clearly in both the texts. Kautilya and Sun Tsu have emphasized the need for benevolence in the treatment of the subjects and soldier, respectively. The texts are also similar in their perspective on strategic situationalism. While the former advises the King to "choose the right time and place of action," the latter focuses on the concept of *Shi* which also translates as situationalism. As far as the transformational character of leadership is concerned, both the texts provide an explanation about the charisma of the leader. *The Arthshastra* speaks about the inspirational qualities of a King. *The Art of War* elucidates how a General can command the respect of his soldiers through values of justice and righteousness.

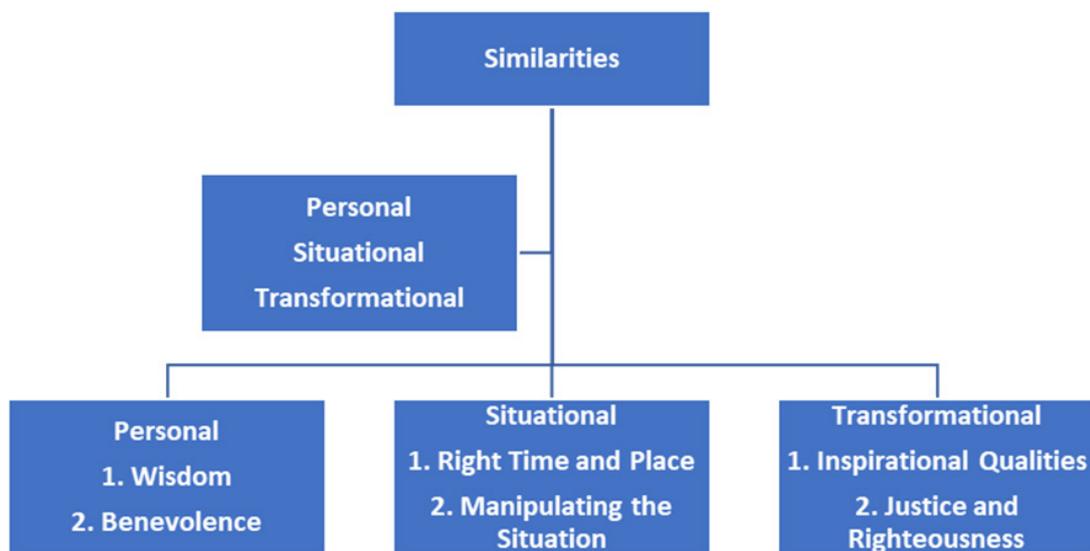


Figure 2: Similar Leadership Traits Explained in *The Arthashastra* and *The Art of War*

The difference in the approach of the two texts lies in the fact that while *The Arthshastra* outlines the role of the King as far as the economic and social welfare of the subjects is concerned, *The Art of War* explain the role of the General only in relation to military affairs. The role of the King is all-encompassing in *The Arthshastra*, and the King is supposed to be the guardian of the people,

whereas the Military General in *The Art of War* is advised to be benevolent towards his soldiers but not to develop much attachment. On the other hand, a “good” King in *The Arthshastra* is supposed to be like a father to his subjects.

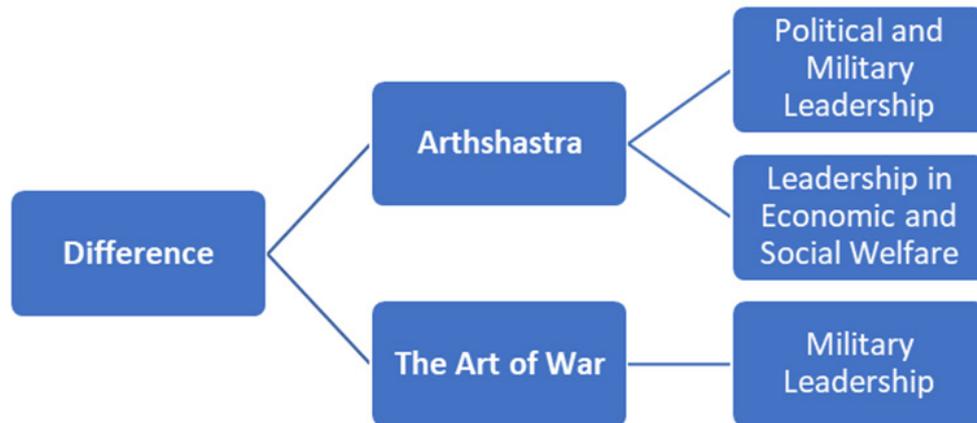


Figure 3: Leadership Roles Defined in the Texts

Leadership in War and Diplomacy

Leadership is a critical concept in both war and diplomacy. Leadership is paramount for the success of any army or with regard to foreign relations. It is also an essential factor during times of peace when diplomatic relations have to be forged with other states. Kautilya’s *The Arthshastra* is considered to be the finest exposition on the principles of foreign policy. Books 7, 11 and 12 together constitute a brilliant, comprehensive and logical analysis of relations between states. The King is the central figure in the theory of foreign relations explained by Kautilya. It is the King who is supposed to lead the foreign affairs of the state. It is also the King who is supposed to lead an army from the front. Kautilya eulogizes the King who being a potential conqueror wishes to enlarge his own territory. According to Kautilya, such a King has excellent personal qualities, resources and constituents of his state and follows good policies. (*The Arthshastra*, 6.2.13)

Kautilya propounded the Mandala theory in which immediate neighbour are to be considered as enemies but a neighbour’s neighbour is to be considered as an ally or friend. The Kautilyan theory of foreign policy is based on certain guiding principles— a) a king shall develop his state, i.e. augment its resources and power in order to enable him to embark on a campaign of conquest; b) the enemy shall be eliminated; c) those who help are friends; d) a prudent course should always be adopted; e) peace is to be preferred to war; f) a king’s be-

behaviour in victory and defeat must be just. (Rangarajan, 1992, p. 546).

Kautilya outlined six tools of foreign policy which a King is supposed to follow—a) *Sandhi*: making peace by entering into an agreement with specific conditions, i.e. by entering into a treaty; b) *Vigraha*: meaning hostility is another tool of foreign policy. This can be further classified into three- i) open war, a battle in the traditional sense, ii) secret war in which an enemy can be attacked in various secretive ways, iii) undeclared war: using secret agents and occult practices; c) *Asana*: staying quiet. This is a transitional stage between peace to war; d) *Yana*: preparing for war. This is a transitional stage between war to peace; e) *Samrasya*: seeking protection when threatened from a more powerful king or taking refuge in a fort; f) *Dvaidhibhava*: the policy of making peace with a neighbouring king in order to pursue, with his help, the policy of hostility towards another. (Rangarajan, 1992, pp.548-49).

The King is advised to increase his strength during the period of waiting. He can then set out on a campaign against his enemy. He must choose a time when the opponent is not fully prepared or his forces are not fully mobilized. He might choose a time when the enemy is suffering from a calamity; the enemy's troubles from with one constituent of his state cannot be compensated by the other constituents; the enemy's subjects have become impoverished, disloyal and disunited due to oppression by the troops and ill-treatment by their monarch and are susceptible to enticement or desertion; the enemy's draught animals, men, stores and fortifications have become weak due to fire, flood, disease, epidemic or famine. (*The Arthshastra*, 7.4.15) Therefore, deception is a means and method of conquest fully endorsed by Kautilya in *The Arthshastra*.

Kautilya states that a king's foreign policy is determined by power. However, power is not only measured in terms of military power but also in terms of intellectual power and the morale of the King and his associates. He has explained a dynamic relationship between power and progress. The king projects his power by using the appropriate foreign policy, and in doing so he makes progress. This progress further contributes to the enhancement of the King's power. *The Arthshastra* states that in principle, a strong King must make peace with an equally powerful or strong King and wage war against a weaker King. The text states that "he who fights a strong king is crushed like a foot soldier fighting an elephant. A fight with an unequal King brings losses to both sides, just like the destruction of two unbaked mud pots hitting each other. Like a

stone striking a mud pot, a more powerful King gains decisive victory over a weaker one.” (*The Arthshastra*, 7.3.1-5) The leadership skills of a strong King are in this case determined by the fact that he chooses not to bring harm to his kingdom and people. He chooses peace over destruction.

While discussing the methods that can be adopted by a weak King, Kautilya states that a weak King must use secret methods in order to avoid being conquered. Different tactics are suggested in the text, for instance, planning the assassination of the aggressor, engineering chaos in the military base camp, and subverting the subjects during a clandestine expedition. Kautilya provides details about the deceptive tactics that can be adopted by a weak King in order to save his territory and people from the wrath of the aggressor. (Rangarajan, 1992, p.525). A weak King can resort to treachery knowing that he cannot defeat the aggressor on the battlefield. Poisoning, fire, occult, drawing the enemy out of his camp, and secretive use of weapons are ways in which a weak King can survive. A weak King also is a leader and because of lack of resources, his leadership skills, according to *The Arthshastra*, can be based on deception.

In order to strengthen his position, the Kautilya implores the King to organize a secret service. In the *Arthshastra* two types of secret service are mentioned—agents based in one place and roving agents. Agents based in one place can be the intelligence officers, spies under the cover of monks, householder, merchants or ascetics. Roving agents include the secret agents, assassins, poisoners, and women mendicants. (*Arthshastra*, 1.11.1) The text pronounces that any information provided by these agents is to be taken as true. It also states that any agent who proves himself to be consistently unreliable is liable to be eliminated. The secret service is the pillar of the King’s information system during times of war as well as peace.

Kautilya’s *Arthshastra* is replete with information on the tactics to be adopted by the King during times of war as well as with regard to foreign policy and negotiations. These tactics are considered to be the fulcrum of his leadership. Similarly, Sun Tsu’s *The Art of War* is also an instructional manual for the Military General. It’s focus, however, is more on war and less on foreign policy, though the text clearly states that war is the last resort. It promotes the policy of expansionism without war and war in case necessary.

Sun Tsu clearly states in *The Art of War* that “all warfare is based on deception, hence when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces,

we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near.” (Tsu, 2000, p.3). The text also says that one must “Hold out baits to entice the enemy. Feign disorder and crush him.”

Like in the *Arthshastra* which explains the perils of fighting against a stronger King, *The Art of War* also states that “If he is in superior strength, evade him.” Deception being the key principle of war, the text states that the enemy needs to be attacked “when he is unprepared, appear when you are not expected.” (Tsu, 2000, p.4). Sun Tsu also states that the leader must “Await the appearance of disorder in the enemy camp.” The moment there is disorder, one must strike. In this, the leadership skills of the General are tested. The text also spells out the tactics to be adopted by a skillful leader. It states that “A skillful leader subdues the enemy’s troops without any fighting; he captures their cities without laying siege to them; he overthrows their kingdom without lengthy operations in the field. With his forces intact, he will dispute the mastery of the Empire, and thus, without losing a man, his triumph will be complete. This is the method of attacking by stratagem.” (Tsu, 2000, p.9). Sun Tsu, therefore, explains the strategy which needs to be adopted by the leader. He opines that a leader is not supposed to engage in lengthy operations on the field. He is supposed to strategize in such a manner that no man needs to sacrifice his life and the territory is also taken over.

The General is advised to exercise caution. The text states that “No ruler should put his troops on the field merely to gratify his own spleen, no general should fight a battle simply out of pique. If it is to your advantage make a move, if not, stay where you are. A good general is full of caution.” Sun Tsu in *The Art of War* also explains the importance of knowing the enemy. It clearly spells out that “if you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained, you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.” (Tsu, 2000, p.11). The leader is, therefore, supposed to gauge the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy, and it is only this that will lead him to victory. While stressing on the essentials of victory, Sun Tsu also provides strong lessons on leadership. According to him, a leader can expect victory only if he knows when to fight and when not to fight.

Sun Tsu also stresses that a leader must know how to handle both supe-

rior and inferior forces, and he must ensure that his army is animated by the same spirit throughout its ranks. Sun Tsu claims that a leader will win only if he is prepared to wait and take the enemy by surprise. The text also mentions that a leader on the battlefield must be the foremost source of authority and that his military capacity should not be interfered with by the sovereign of the King. Herein lies the difference between the *Arthshastra* and *The Art of War*. In *Arthshastra*, the sovereign or King is the supreme commander whereas in *The Art of War*, the Military General has a greater role to play. He receives his command from the sovereign but it is the General who devises all the tactics on the battlefield and not the King.

Similar to the role of spies mentioned in the *Arthshastra*, the text written by Sun Tsu also throws light on why a leader must employ spies in order to gather useful information about the enemy. Sun Tsu states that “what enables a wise sovereign and a good general to strike and conquer and achieve things beyond the reach of ordinary men, is foreknowledge.” (Tsu, 2000, p.59). Therefore, spies must be used by the leader. The text provides five categories of spies—local spies, inward spies, converted spies, doomed spies, surviving spies. Local spies are inhabitants of the district, inward spies are officials of the enemy, converted spies are the enemy’s spies who have turned over, doomed spies are the ones who are used for deception, surviving spies are the ones who bring back news from the enemy’s camp.

A comparative analysis of the two texts reveals that—i) the concept of “deception” is considered as a pillar of leadership and an essential pre-requisite in times of war as well in the context of forging diplomatic relations with states. There can be no victory for the leader without the use of deceptive tactics; ii) a leader must be wise enough not to indulge in warfare with an equally strong enemy; iii) a leader must be able to gauge the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy, as this is critical for victory; iv) leadership is based on information and the procurement of information by the use of spies; v) a leader must know when to strike and when not to strike. The difference between the two texts is in the manner in the treatment of the sovereign or the King. While the *Arthshastra* vests all powers in the King, *The Art of War* vests all powers in the General and considers him to be the supreme leader. It goes as far to state that the sovereign must not interfere with the duties and responsibilities of the General.



Figure 4: Leadership in War in Diplomacy: Similarities and Differences

Conclusion

The *Arthshastra* and *The Art of War* are seminal texts in the civilizational history of India and China respectively. An in-depth analysis of both the works reveal that there are significant elements of public leadership contained in the pages of these texts. While *The Arthshastra* is primarily an economic and political treatise and details the duties and responsibilities of a good King, *The Art of War* is a military treatise which hold the Military General to be the supreme leader and essays the leadership role of the General. The *Arthshastra* and *The Art of War* are similar as far as portraying the leadership traits of a King or General are concerned, and both the texts employ a three-pronged approach as far as defining leadership is concerned—the person-centred view, contingency or situational view and transformational view. As far as leadership in war and diplomacy is concerned, there are marked similarities in manner in which the role of the leader is explained in the texts, with the exception of the King being considered the most important entity in *The Arthshastra* and the Military

General being supreme in *The Art of War*. The leadership roles of the King and General are, however, similar in nature as far as war and diplomacy are concerned. Kautilya's *The Arthshastra* is an evidence of the intellectual depth of India in the ancient past. It is also a valuable treatise on leadership skills and military strategy, while *The Art of War* is purely a text on military strategy.

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