

Counsel, Power, and Restraint: Foreign Policy in Early Sanskrit Political Thought from the Vedas to the *Arthaśāstra*

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Abstract

Foreign policy in early Sanskrit literature is not presented in the modern language of embassies, treaties, international law, or nation-states. Yet the basic questions are already present: How should one community deal with another? When is peace better than war? What is the duty of a king towards an envoy? How should a ruler protect his own people without becoming unjust? This article studies the growth of foreign policy ideas from the Vedic period to the Epics, *Dharmaśāstra*, and *Arthaśāstra*. In the Vedic period, political life begins with clan, territory, cattle wealth, ritual protection, and the idea of collective security. In the Epics, especially the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, diplomacy becomes a moral drama. The envoy is treated as a sacred messenger, and the king is judged by his control over anger. In *Dharmaśāstra*, foreign policy is placed under the larger frame of *rājadharmā*, where law, punishment, diplomacy, and social order are joined together. In the *Arthaśāstra*, these earlier ideas become a systematic science of statecraft, with the seven elements of the state, the circle of kings, spies, envoys, war, peace, neutrality, alliance, and dual policy. The study shows that Sanskrit political thought is neither purely idealistic nor merely aggressive. It accepts power, but it also tries to discipline power through wisdom, self-control, timing, and the protection of social welfare.

Keywords

Vedic polity, Sanskrit political thought, foreign policy, *rājadharmā*; *dūtadharmā*, *Dharmaśāstra*, *Arthaśāstra*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, diplomacy, *śāḍguṇya*, *maṇḍala* theory.

Introduction

Foreign policy is usually understood as the organized conduct of one political power towards another. In modern language, it includes diplomacy, war, treaty, alliance, neutrality, trade, defence, and international relations. Early Sanskrit literature did not use the same modern vocabulary, because ancient India was not organized around modern nation-states. Yet the practical problem was the same. A ruler had to protect his land, respect allies, face enemies, send messengers, receive envoys, decide whether to make peace or war, and preserve the welfare of his people. In that sense, the history of foreign policy in Sanskrit thought is the history of how political wisdom slowly moved from tribal protection to moral diplomacy and then to systematic statecraft.

The Vedic world gives the first background. It shows a society moving from clan life to territorial life. Cattle, land, family, priests, chiefs, and assemblies were important. The *rājān* was not yet the fully developed emperor of later political texts. He was first a leader of people, a protector in war, and a supporter of ritual order. The world around him was not empty. There were other clans, other peoples, rivals, and outsiders. There were conflicts with *dāsa* and *dasyu* groups, but also signs of contact, exchange, and assimilation. This is important because foreign policy begins wherever there is an “other” beyond one’s own group.

The Epics take this world into a wider human field. The *Rāmāyaṇa* gives memorable scenes of kings, envoys, alliances, exile, war, and moral responsibility. The *Mahābhārata* gives an even larger theatre where diplomacy, negotiation, peace missions, and war stand side by side. In both Epics, a ruler is not praised simply because he wins. He is praised when he knows *dharma*, controls anger, honours the messenger, and thinks of the future. The epic king is tested not only on the battlefield but also in the council chamber.

Dharmaśāstra then codifies the duties of the king. It turns many scattered moral ideas into rules of conduct. It treats foreign policy as part of *rājadharmā*, the duty of rulership. The king must protect society, punish crime, maintain order, and handle other rulers with prudence. In *Dharmaśāstra*, political power is never free from ethical expectation. Even when the king is allowed to punish, he is also asked to restrain himself.

The *Arthaśāstra* gives the most detailed and practical form to this tradition. Kauṭilya does not write only about moral conduct. He writes about administration, treasury, army, forts, ministers, spies, war, alliance, and policy. His thought is sharp and realistic, but not careless. The ruler who ignores strength fails; the ruler who ignores counsel also fails. The *Arthaśāstra* therefore becomes the most mature Sanskrit manual of foreign policy because it joins observation, planning, secrecy, timing, and calculation.

This article examines these four stages together. It does not treat them as isolated books. It reads them as part of a long Indian reflection on power and responsibility. The main argument is simple: early Sanskrit political thought understands foreign policy as the art of protecting life through wise action. It allows war, but it does not worship war. It praises peace, but it does not ask the king to be weak. Its central demand is balanced judgement.

Vedic Beginnings: Clan, Territory, Protection, and the Political “Other”

The Vedic period gives the oldest cultural background for political life in India. The earliest Vedic society was not a large bureaucratic state. It was a society of clans and lineages, with pastoral wealth, early agriculture, chiefs, priests, and assemblies. Words such as *jana*, *viś*, *kula*, *rājān*, *viśpati*, and *gopati* show a world in which the ruler was tied closely to people, cattle, kinship, and protection. The king's power was not yet the impersonal power of the later state. It was a personal and ritual power, strengthened by bravery, generosity, sacrifice, and support from priests.

The later Vedic age shows change. Vedic culture spread from the Punjab region to the Ganga valley. Agriculture became more settled. The use of iron helped the clearing of land and the growth of production. Social order became more complex. The four-varṇa idea became stronger. Sacrifices became larger and more elaborate. The *rājān* moved slowly towards kingship in a more territorial sense. These changes created the base for later foreign policy because territory, surplus, and political authority made relations between neighbouring powers more serious.

The Rigvedic world also knew conflict. The Vedic people fought among themselves, and they also fought with groups described as *dāsa*, *dasyu*, or *yātudhāna*. Such words should not be read only in a narrow ethnic manner. They also show the language of fear, hostility, and religious imagination. The enemy was sometimes seen as a human rival and sometimes as a dark or destructive force. The hymns to Agni as protector are important in this context. Fire is not merely a ritual flame. Agni becomes a guardian of the community, a destroyer of hostile forces, and a symbol of watchfulness.

A *mantra* of the *Ṛgveda* speaks of Agni as the slayer of harmful beings and the protector by day and night:

rakṣoḥaṇam vājinam ā jigharmi
mitram prathiṣṭham upa yāmi śarma /
śisāno agniḥ kratubhiḥ samiddhaḥ
*sa no divā sa riṣaḥ pātu naktam //*¹

The meaning is clear: the community seeks protection from danger. A foreign policy idea is hidden inside this ritual prayer. A people must know who threatens them; they must organize protection; they must keep watch both in daylight and darkness. At this early stage, policy is not yet written as a manual. It appears as prayer, memory, and collective anxiety. Still, the political sense is present.

The Vedic tradition is not only a literature of conflict. It also contains a strong desire for harmony, agreement, and common action. A famous *mantra* from the *Ṛgveda* calls people to walk together and speak together:

saṁ gacchadhvaṁ saṁ vadadhvaṁ
saṁ vo manāmsi jānatām /
devā bhāgam yathā pūrve
*saṁjānānā upāsate //*²

This verse is often read as a social and spiritual hymn. It is also politically meaningful. A community that cannot agree within itself cannot face outsiders wisely. The first requirement of foreign policy is internal unity. If the council is divided, if the king and ministers are confused, if the people do not trust their ruler, external policy becomes weak. Later texts will say this in the language of ministers, forts, treasury, army, and allies. The *Veda* says it in the language of shared speech and shared mind.

The Vedic background therefore gives three early foundations of foreign policy. First, there is protection against danger. Second, there is unity within the group. Third, there is a movement from clan to territory, which prepares the rise of kingship. These are not small matters. They are the soil from which later political science grows.

The Epics: Diplomacy as Moral Drama

The Epics bring political thought closer to human life. In the Vedic hymns, the enemy often appears in symbolic or ritual language. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, the enemy has a face, a court, a family, a pride, a weakness, and sometimes even wisdom. The king must therefore deal not only with external danger but also with the inner danger of anger, greed, and pride.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* is especially important for the law and dignity of the envoy. The scene of Hanumān in Laṅkā is a small jewel of diplomatic thought. Hanumān enters the enemy capital, gathers information, destroys the royal garden to test the strength of Rāvaṇa's forces, and is finally captured and brought to the court. Rāvaṇa becomes angry and wants to kill him. Vibhīṣaṇa then gives counsel. He reminds Rāvaṇa that the killing of an envoy is not proper for noble rulers. The scene is dramatic, but its political teaching is sober: even in war, the messenger should not be killed.

Vibhīṣaṇa's advice is expressed in the following verse:

*kṣamasva roṣaṁ tyaja rākṣasendra
prasīda mad-vākyam idaṁ śṛṇuṣva /
vadhaṁ na kurvanti parāvarajñāḥ
dūtasya santo vasudhādhīpendrāḥ //*³

The verse is simple but deep. It asks the king to forgive, to give up anger, and to listen. It says that virtuous rulers who understand higher and lower conduct do not kill a messenger. Here diplomacy is not treated as mere technique. It is treated as a test of civilization. A ruler's greatness is seen in how he behaves when anger is strongest.

Vibhīṣaṇa continues the same line of thought:

*rājadharmā-viruddhaṁ ca loka-vṛtteśca garhitam /
tava cādṛśaṁ vīra kaperasya pramāṇam //*⁴

The killing of Hanumān, he says, would be against *rājadharmā* and condemned by public conduct. This is one of the finest statements of political restraint in Sanskrit literature. It joins two standards: *dharma* and *loka-vṛtti*. The king must follow sacred duty, but he must also care for accepted public morality. Power is not enough. Reputation matters. The judgement of the world matters.

Another verse from the same passage gives an even sharper lesson:

*gr̥hyante yadi roṣeṇa tvādr̥śo 'pi vipaścitah /
tataḥ śāstra-vipaścittvaṁ śrama eva hi kevalam //*⁵

If even a learned person is seized by anger, then his knowledge of *śāstra* becomes only fruitless labour. This is a powerful warning for political leaders. A king may know law, strategy, and scripture. But if anger rules him at the moment of decision, his learning becomes dry decoration. In foreign policy, uncontrolled emotion is dangerous. It can turn a possible negotiation into a disaster.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* therefore gives one of the earliest literary pictures of *dūtadharmā*, the duty concerning envoys. The envoy may be punished if he commits wrong, but killing him is condemned. A ruler must distinguish between the messenger and the message, between enemy policy and diplomatic person. This idea is remarkably close to later principles of diplomatic immunity, though expressed in an ancient moral frame.

The *Mahābhārata* widens the discussion. It is a huge text of family conflict, kingdom, oath, humiliation, diplomacy, war, and moral doubt. The Udyogaparvan is particularly important because it shows repeated attempts to avoid war. Kṛṣṇa goes as a peace messenger to the Kaurava court. His mission fails, but its failure is meaningful. The text shows that war should not be the first step. Counsel, negotiation, and the chance of peace must be tried before the sword is accepted.

The *Mahābhārata* is not politically naive. It knows ambition, deception, revenge, and the hunger for power. Yet it also knows the cost of war. The battlefield of Kurukṣetra is not shown as a festival of victory. It is a field of loss. Thus the epic teaches that diplomacy is necessary not because every enemy is kind, but because war consumes both sides. A wise ruler must measure not only the glory of victory but also the wound it leaves on society.

Dharmaśāstra: Foreign Policy Under Rājadharmā

Dharmaśāstra gives political thought a normative frame. It does not speak of foreign policy as an independent modern discipline. It places it within *rājadharmā*, the duty of the king. The king must protect subjects, punish wrongdoers, uphold social order, respect learned counsel, collect revenue, and deal with neighbouring rulers. Here the foreign policy of the king is part of his larger obligation to protect *dharma*.

Texts such as *Manusmṛti*, *Yājñavalkyasmṛti*, *Nāradaśmṛti*, *Parāśarasmṛti*, and *Bṛhaspatismṛti* belong to the wide family of *Dharmaśāstra* literature. They speak of duties, law, social conduct, inheritance, punishment, judicial procedure, and royal functions. Their importance for foreign policy lies in the way they link external action with moral order. The king is not only a warrior. He is a guardian of a social body. If he acts unjustly towards outsiders, his own moral authority weakens.

One of the central ideas of *Dharmaśāstra* political thought is that punishment, or *daṇḍa*, must be controlled. *Daṇḍa* is necessary because society cannot stand without law. But *daṇḍa* becomes dangerous when it becomes anger. This is why the epic warning about Rāvaṇa is so close to *Dharmaśāstra*. A king must use force, but force must be lawful, proportionate, and guided by counsel.

Dharmaśāstra also accepts the practical need for different policies towards other rulers. A king cannot treat every neighbouring king in the same way. Some are stronger, some weaker, some friendly, some hostile, some useful as allies, and some dangerous as hidden enemies. This practical awareness leads to the idea of six measures of policy, often called *ṣaḍguṇya*. A well-known formulation says:

*sandhiṃ ca vighrahaṃ caiva yānam āsanam eva ca /
dvaidhibhāvaṃ saṃśrayaṃ ca ṣaḍguṇyaṃ paricakṣate //*⁶

The six policies are peace or treaty (*sandhi*), hostility or war (*vighraha*), march or expedition (*yāna*), remaining quiet or sitting still (*āsana*), dual policy (*dvaidhibhāva*), and seeking shelter or alliance (*saṃśraya*). This classification is important because it shows a move from emotional reaction to strategic choice. The king should not simply fight because he is angry or make peace because he is afraid. He must choose according to time, strength, weakness, place, and expected result.

Dharmaśāstra does not reject power. It only asks power to stand under *dharma*. A king must not be lazy, blind, or sentimental. He must know when an enemy is dangerous. He must preserve his people. But he must also remember that wrong action creates disorder. Thus *Dharmaśāstra* forms a bridge between the moral world of the Epics and the highly systematic world of the *Arthaśāstra*.

The *Arthaśāstra*: System, Calculation, and the Science of Policy

The *Arthaśāstra* marks a new level of political organization. It is not only a text of moral advice. It is a science of governance. Kauṭilya, also known as Cāṇakya or Viṣṇugupta, is remembered as the thinker who helped overthrow the Nandas and install Candragupta Maurya. Whether every detail of this tradition is historical or legendary, the intellectual position of the *Arthaśāstra* is clear. It is the most detailed Sanskrit text on statecraft, economy, administration, war, diplomacy, espionage, and royal discipline.

The text contains fifteen books. Its range is wide: the training of the king, ministers, officers, revenue, agriculture, mines, law, crime control, calamities, preparations for war, battle formations, allies, enemies, oligarchies, secret measures, and restoration of order. In this system, foreign policy is not an ornamental subject. It is one of the central duties of rule. A state that cannot deal with other states cannot remain safe.

Kauṭilya's first great contribution is the theory of the seven elements of the state, known as *saptāṅga*. The state is not just the king. It is an organism made of several parts:

*svāmī-amātya-janapada-durga-kośa-daṇḍa-mitrāṇi prakṛtayaḥ //*⁷

The seven elements are the ruler (*svāmī*), ministers (*amātya*), territory and people (*janapada*), fort (*durga*), treasury (*kośa*), army or force (*daṇḍa*), and ally (*mitra*). This list is a remarkable political insight. It means that foreign policy depends on internal strength. A weak treasury cannot support war. Bad ministers cannot conduct diplomacy. A poor *janapada* cannot sustain long policy. A broken fort invites attack. An unreliable ally becomes a danger. Thus external policy is built inside the state before it is practiced outside.

The second major contribution is the maṇḍala theory, the circle of kings. Kauṭilya observes that a king's immediate neighbour is often a natural enemy, while the neighbour's neighbour may become

a friend. This is not a moral rule but a strategic tendency. The world is seen as a circle of interests. Every ruler stands within a web of rivalries, allies, middle powers, neutral powers, and possible supporters. Foreign policy therefore requires mapping. The king must know not only one enemy but the whole pattern of relations.

The third major contribution is the *ṣāḍguṇya*, the six methods of foreign policy. The *Arthaśāstra* treats them with great detail. A king may make peace, wage war, march, remain quiet, seek protection, or follow a dual policy. The choice depends on relative power. If the king is weaker, peace may be wise. If stronger, advance may be proper. If equal, waiting may be better. If one path gives advantage but another risk remains, dual policy may be used. In this way, policy becomes a matter of intelligent timing.

A compact *sūtra* expresses the sixfold policy:

saṁdhivigrahāsanayānasamśrayadvaidhībhāvāḥ ṣāḍguṇyamityācāryāḥ /⁸

The meaning is not that a king should use all six randomly. The meaning is that a ruler must keep all six available in his mind. Foreign policy is not a straight road. It is a chessboard under changing weather. A foolish king has only one answer to every situation. A wise king has several options and chooses the one that preserves advantage.

The *Arthaśāstra* also gives great importance to envoys and spies. The envoy is the visible voice of the king, while the spy is the hidden eye of the state. Both are necessary in Kauṭilya's system. But they serve different purposes. The envoy speaks, negotiates, observes, and carries messages. The spy collects secret knowledge. A ruler who acts without knowledge acts in darkness. This is why intelligence gathering is central to Kauṭilya's thought.

At the same time, the *Arthaśāstra* is not a simple book of aggression. It is often described as hard realism, and that is partly true. It accepts deception, secret action, and severe punishment in some situations. Yet its aim is not violence for its own sake. Its aim is *yogakṣema*, the acquisition and protection of welfare. A ruler who destroys his own people in reckless war is not successful. A ruler who keeps the state safe, prosperous, and respected is successful. Thus calculation is joined with public welfare.

Similarities Across the Veda, Epics, *Dharmaśāstra*, and *Arthaśāstra*

The first similarity is the centrality of protection. In the Vedic hymns, protection appears as prayer to Agni. In the Epics, it appears as the king's duty to protect *dharma* and people. In *Dharmaśāstra*, it becomes a legal and moral obligation. In the *Arthaśāstra*, it becomes a complete system of defence, administration, and policy. The language changes, but the concern remains the same: the ruler exists to protect.

The second similarity is the importance of counsel. The Vedic world values assembly and common speech. The Epics show wise advisers such as Vibhīṣaṇa, Vidura, Bhīṣma, and Kṛṣṇa. *Dharmaśāstra* expects the king to listen to learned persons. The *Arthaśāstra* makes ministers one of the seven elements of the state. In every stage, the king who refuses counsel becomes dangerous.

The third similarity is the recognition of the enemy. Sanskrit political thought never pretends that all relations are peaceful. The *Veda* speaks of hostile forces; the Epics show enemies with

armies; *Dharmaśāstra* allows war; the *Arthaśāstra* creates a full science of enemies, allies, and neutral powers. This is a realistic tradition. It knows that danger exists.

The fourth similarity is the restraint of anger. The *Rāmāyaṇa* makes this especially clear in the court of Rāvaṇa. But the same principle runs across the tradition. A ruler may punish, but he must not become a slave of anger. The *Arthaśāstra* too values self-control, because an uncontrolled king cannot calculate correctly. Passion clouds policy.

The fifth similarity is that internal strength and external policy are joined. A united clan, a stable kingdom, a lawful society, and a well-administered state all become the basis of successful foreign relations. No text praises outward expansion while ignoring inner disorder. The political house must have a foundation before the flag is carried outside.

Differences in Emphasis and Method

The differences are also important. The Vedic stage is symbolic and ritual in expression. It does not present a manual of diplomacy. It speaks through hymns, gods, enemies, prayers, and communal identity. Its political world is still emerging.

The Epics are narrative and ethical. They do not give systematic tables like the *Arthaśāstra*. They show policy through stories. A scene, a dialogue, a mistake, or a war becomes the carrier of political teaching. The reader learns from living characters, not from abstract rules alone.

Dharmaśāstra is normative and codifying. It turns political experience into duties, categories, and rules. It asks what is proper for a king. It gives importance to law, conduct, punishment, and social order. Its foreign policy is therefore strongly tied to *dharma*.

The *Arthaśāstra* is analytical and strategic. It does not merely ask what is morally beautiful. It asks what works, what protects the state, what produces advantage, and what prevents danger. It is more detailed about spies, allies, forts, treasury, expeditions, and war. It is the most technical stage of the tradition.

These differences do not make the texts contradictory. They show growth. A seed is not a tree, but the tree is already hidden in the seed. The Vedic idea of protection grows into epic diplomacy, *Dharmaśāstra* duty, and *Arthaśāstra* strategy.

The Human Meaning of Ancient Foreign Policy

The most valuable part of this tradition is its human understanding of power. It knows that kings are not machines. They feel anger, pride, fear, desire, and ambition. Therefore, political training must include self-training. A ruler who cannot govern himself cannot govern others. This is why Vibhīṣaṇa's warning to Rāvaṇa is so important. The death of an envoy would not only be a military act. It would reveal a ruined mind.

The second human lesson is that speech matters. Diplomacy begins with speech: the message of the envoy, the counsel of the minister, the warning of the friend, the peace proposal, the treaty, and the public declaration. Words can prevent war or provoke it. The Vedic call "*sam vadam*" becomes a political principle: speak together before breaking apart.

The third lesson is that peace and war are both responsibilities. Peace without strength may become surrender. War without necessity becomes destruction. The Sanskrit texts try to avoid both extremes. They ask the ruler to judge time, place, strength, justice, and consequence.

The fourth lesson is that the welfare of subjects remains the final test. The *Arthaśāstra* may sound hard, but it repeatedly assumes that the state exists to protect prosperity and order. A foreign policy that wins glory but ruins the people is not wise. A ruler must think of farmers, traders, soldiers, families, and the future stability of the kingdom.

A Note on Method: Reading Foreign Policy in Ancient Texts

A careful reading of early Sanskrit literature needs one important caution. We should not force modern political terms on ancient texts in a crude way. The Vedic people did not speak of “foreign policy” as a ministry. The epic kings did not send ambassadors to nation-states with printed credentials. *Dharmaśāstra* did not frame international law in the modern sense. Kauṭilya did not write for a world of the United Nations. Yet these differences do not make the ancient material useless. They only tell us to read it with historical sympathy.

The better method is to look for functions rather than labels. When a Vedic hymn asks Agni to protect the community from hostile forces, it is dealing with collective security. When Hanumān stands in Rāvaṇa’s court as the messenger of Rāma, it is diplomacy. When Vibhīṣaṇa argues that a messenger should not be killed, it is a rule of diplomatic conduct. When *Manusmṛti* and *Arthaśāstra* speak of *sandhi*, *vigraha*, *yāna*, *āsana*, *saṁśraya*, and *dvaividhibhāva*, they are discussing policy options between rulers. When Kauṭilya maps allies, enemies, and neutral powers, he is offering a theory of international relations in the language of his own age.

This functional method helps us avoid two mistakes. The first mistake is to exaggerate and claim that every modern idea already existed in exactly the same form in ancient India. The second mistake is to dismiss the ancient texts because they do not use modern terms. A balanced reading sees both continuity and difference. It recognizes that early Sanskrit thinkers had a refined understanding of power, fear, alliance, messenger, counsel, and conflict, even though their political world was different from ours.

This method also shows why literature is important for political history. The *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* are not textbooks of political science, yet they preserve political wisdom in narrative form. A scene of anger, a debate in court, a failed peace mission, or a vow taken before war may reveal more about political ethics than a dry rule. Ancient Indian statecraft therefore lives in many literary homes: hymn, epic, law code, *nīti* text, and *arthaśāstra*.

Diplomacy, Speech, and the Sacred Weight of the Messenger

One of the most striking features of the Sanskrit political imagination is the high value given to speech. The spoken word is not treated as a small thing. A promise creates obligation. A treaty creates order. A wrong word can start a war. A wise word can save a kingdom. The *dūta*, or envoy, stands at the centre of this world of speech. He carries the king’s mind into another court. He may not be powerful in arms, but he is powerful as a representative voice.

This is why the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s treatment of Hanumān is so important. Hanumān is not a neutral postman. He is a warrior, a spy, and an envoy. He has entered Laṅkā secretly and has destroyed

property. Still Vibhīṣaṇa insists that the king must not kill him because he is a messenger. This does not mean that an envoy can never be disciplined. It means that even punishment must follow rule and measure. The diplomatic person cannot be treated merely as the enemy's body.

The idea has a larger ethical meaning. To protect the messenger is to protect the possibility of speech between enemies. Once a messenger is killed, the bridge of speech is burnt. War then becomes easier, and peace becomes almost impossible. Ancient Sanskrit political thought therefore understands a truth that remains valid: diplomacy survives only when the channel of communication is protected.

The *Mahābhārata* offers the same principle in another form. Kṛṣṇa's peace mission to the Kaurava court is not successful, but the mission itself is necessary. It proves that the Pāṇḍavas did not rush to war without giving peace a chance. It also exposes the inner condition of Duryodhana's court. The refusal of just compromise becomes a moral sign. Diplomacy here is not weakness. It is a way of revealing truth before history and society.

In this sense, the envoy is both political and moral. He carries information, but he also tests the conscience of the receiving king. A ruler who insults an envoy may win a moment of pride, but he loses moral stature. A ruler who listens even to unpleasant speech shows greatness. This is why self-control becomes part of diplomacy. The ear of the king is as important as the sword of the king.

From Moral Kingship to Strategic Kingship

The movement from *Dharmaśāstra* to *Arthaśāstra* may look like a move from morality to strategy, but the truth is subtler. *Dharmaśāstra* asks what a king ought to do. *Arthaśāstra* asks how a king can successfully do what must be done. *Dharmaśāstra* gives the ethical roof; *Arthaśāstra* builds the administrative house below it. The two traditions sometimes differ in tone, yet both understand that a ruler cannot survive by good intention alone.

Dharmaśāstra is concerned with legitimacy. A king who violates *dharma* weakens his right to rule. *Arthaśāstra* is concerned with capacity. A king who lacks ministers, treasury, forts, army, and allies cannot protect anyone, however noble his heart may be. Together they produce a fuller political vision. Legitimacy without capacity is fragile. Capacity without legitimacy is frightening. Good foreign policy needs both.

Kauṭilya's realism is therefore not a rejection of earlier values. It is a sharpening of political tools. He knows that enemies may deceive, allies may change, and neutral kings may become dangerous. Therefore he asks the ruler to examine strength, weakness, season, terrain, treasury, morale, and hidden intention. This is the discipline of artha. But the aim is still the stability of the realm and the welfare of the people. A state is not maintained for the king's vanity. It is maintained so that order, prosperity, and security may continue.

The ancient Sanskrit discussion of foreign policy can be read, finally, as a long education in judgement. The Vedic seer teaches the need for unity and protection. The epic adviser teaches restraint and honour. The *Dharmaśāstra* teacher teaches duty and law. Kauṭilya teaches calculation and preparedness. When these voices are heard together, they form a many-stringed instrument. Its music is not simple, but it is rich: protect without arrogance, negotiate without fear, fight without cruelty, and rule without forgetting the human cost of power.

Relevance for Modern Thought

Early Sanskrit foreign policy cannot be copied mechanically into the modern world. Today we have nation-states, international law, global institutions, human rights, nuclear weapons, and economic interdependence. But ancient Sanskrit political thought can still offer principles.

First, it teaches that diplomacy must come before war. The Epics show the honour of the peace mission even when it fails. Second, it teaches that envoys must be protected. This principle remains central to modern diplomatic practice. Third, it teaches that internal disorder weakens external policy. A country's foreign policy is only as strong as its institutions, economy, leadership, and public trust. Fourth, it teaches that power must be guided by counsel. Decisions of war and peace should not be made in anger. Fifth, it teaches strategic flexibility. The six policies remind us that there is no single answer for every international situation.

The tradition also warns against pride. Rāvaṇa had power, but he did not listen. Duryodhana had allies, but he did not yield to justice. Many rulers in the *Arthaśāstra* fail because they misjudge strength, time, or loyalty. These are not old mistakes only. They are permanent mistakes of politics.

Conclusion

Foreign policy in early Sanskrit political thought grows through many forms. In the Vedic period, it begins as protection of the group, unity of speech, and struggle against hostile forces. In the Epics, it becomes a moral drama of envoys, kings, counsel, anger, peace, and war. In *Dharmaśāstra*, it is placed under *rājadharmā* and regulated through law, duty, punishment, and ethical restraint. In the *Arthaśāstra*, it becomes a complete science of statecraft, with the seven elements of the state, the circle of kings, the six methods of policy, envoys, spies, forts, treasury, army, and calculation.

The journey from *Veda* to *Arthaśāstra* is therefore not a movement from spirituality to politics, or from morality to cunning. It is a movement from simple forms of collective protection to a mature understanding of political life. The Sanskrit tradition sees that human society needs both dharma and artha, both ethics and strength, both peace and readiness, both speech and action.

The finest message of this tradition may be stated simply: power must be awake, but not blind; strong, but not cruel; flexible, but not faithless; practical, but not empty of moral memory. The king must protect his people, honour the envoy, listen to counsel, know the enemy, value the ally, and control himself before trying to control the world. This is why ancient Sanskrit political thought remains useful. It does not give a dead museum of old ideas. It gives a living grammar of prudence.

References

1. *Ṛgveda*, 10.87.1.
2. *Ibid*, 10.191.2.
3. *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Sundarakāṇḍa*, 52.5.
4. *Ibid*, 52.6.
5. *Ibid*, 52.8.
6. Manusmṛti, 7.160, cf. *Arthaśāstra*, 7.1.

7. *Arthaśāstra* 6.1.

8. *Ibid*, 7.1.

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