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*Diplomacy as an Expression of Civilization:
the Legacies of China and India*

I- WESTERN DIPLOMACY AND ASIAN WISDOM

Diplomacy is the art and science by which countries and civilizations, on a broader scale, communicate at the highest level, not as mere collections of individuals but as moral persons in their own right, thereby expressing their values and upholding their interests, protecting their security and affirming their visions and ambitions.

By its very nature, diplomacy as a meeting ground or common space, a behavioural *lingua franca* defines and espouses protocols, ways and means that are universally or at least mutually accepted and familiar, but the very essence of power implies that dominant states and civilizational areas in effect impose their concepts and ideals on others. The centre usually sets the rule for the periphery.

The last four centuries have seen the increasing codification and homogenization of the diplomatic tradition that Europe inherited from the medieval *Jus gentium* (public law) and which the Italian princes and Republican rulers of the Renaissance refined under the influence of figures such as Niccolo Machiavelli who shaped or at least rationalized the behaviour patterns of states based on the European experience. The virtuoso practitioners of foreign policy like Vergennes, Pitt, Menshikov, Talleyrand, Nasselrode, Castlereagh, Gorchakov, Metternich and Bismarck are still the role models in diplomatic circles and international relations schools the world over. To this day, foreign policy theories articulated in



the West and prevalent everywhere have not taken into account intellectual contributions from anywhere outside Classical European political philosophy, the only one in which professionals of diplomacy are generally trained, outside the small specialized circle of “Asia experts” who seem to be deputed to try to understand the “enemy” or manage former colonial subjects.

However, now that Asia is rising again and poised to reach the top of the world’s economic pyramid in the coming decades, its major powers have the opportunity, for the first time in centuries, to update and draw sustenance and guidance from their own rich and ancient traditions of statecraft and foreign policy, keeping in mind that if diplomatic culture merely contributes to the maintenance of a homogenous but superficial “global commons”, it can only foster, in the words of Zygmunt Bauman “perfunctory socialisation without risk of comprehension and without the onerous need to translate between distinct universes of meaning”, hence causing statesmen and their peoples to “de-learn the art of negotiating shared meanings and a *modus co-vivendi*” (*Seminar*, 610, June 2010, p. 38).

The first feature that strikes us in the indigenous philosophies of both China and India which profoundly influenced all their smaller neighbours in a wide area, is that they display an organic and permanent interrelation between their “otherworldly”, individually focused theories of being: Taoism in China and Vedantic/Buddhist psycho-epistemology in India and their respective, pragmatic socio-political theories, that is the teachings of Confucius and Sun Tzu in the former and the



Niti and *Artha Shastras* for the latter, as illustrated in the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

To an extent, that is unlike the evolution of Judeo-Christian nation-states where political theory, grounded in the value-free analysis of human behaviour, became increasingly estranged from theological and spiritual doctrines due to an agnostic reliance on empirical observation, ignorant of transcendence, according to the presupposition that ultimate goals can only be “rational” and material. Two end-results of this ultra-secular trend are the Straussian theory of the state (from Leo Strauss), the lodestar of the American Neo-Conservatives and Robert J Aumann’s Game Theory, rumored to be the viaticum of Israeli policy-makers among others.

In the East instead, religious or least cosmological deduction went hand in hand with psychological induction but, contrary to their European contemporaries, East and South Asian leaderships, confident as they may have been of their respective civilizational superiority, were generally not conditioned by monotheistic prejudice that salvation through conversion was the ultimate destiny of those who did not belong to Christendom and were still expecting “God’s Grace” to be visited upon them.

As a result of this discrimination between the faithful and the pagans, the rules of western diplomacy almost until the end of the 19th century were held to apply primarily to relations between Christian, “civilized” nations, as a counterpart to the Quranic *Dar ul Islam*. For the others, conquest and colonization in various ways (such as the unequal treaties



forced upon China) were accepted forms of interaction as they were not generally regarded as belonging to the *jus gentium*.

II- TOWARDS A REVIVAL OF EASTERN DIPLOMATIC THEORY

Nowadays the notion of superiority of monotheism over polytheism has largely faded and even the distinction between “civilized” (western) thinking and “primitive or savage thought” and the “oriental fatalism” which was often depicted as lying in between, has been drastically revised. The universal validity of ancient Asian spiritual and ethical traditions in particular is being acknowledged throughout the Europe and the Americas and time has come to highlight and revive the legacies of statecraft and diplomacy inherited by China and India.

If Confucianism, with its emphasis on order and harmony (*Ch'i* or *Qi*), hierarchy and discipline, upheld by its four (or five) cardinal virtues has an obvious relevance to the essentially anarchical and increasingly anomic international system just as Sun Tzu's teachings have become a *vade mecum* for strategists the world over, the wisdom of Lao Tzu addresses nature's chaos in which it detects, before quantic physics and fractal mathematics, a hidden order: *Tzu Jan*. Lao Tzu's and Chuang Tzu's predilection for silence, humility, flow, darkness, quietness, soft authority as opposed to forceful power and observation rather than agitation find its parallels in the Indian non-violent, meditative and compassionate ideals and those features and qualities become increasingly valuable in our overpopulated, ecologically depleted, stressed and violent world. Lao Tzu notes: “the softest things in the world



overcome the hardest things” and he cites water as an example of this quiet, gentle force that mirrors the notion of *wei wu wei* (action within –apparent- inaction).

Both the Chinese and Indian philosophies see no opposition or even discontinuity between polar opposite, such as light and darkness and therefore they don't fall in the Aristotelian and later Manichean trap that western political and strategic thinking is too often locked in when it is directed against the “Evil Other”, be it fascist, communist, capitalist, islamist or any other whom it wishes to destroy or submit. As the *Dao Teh Ch'ing* puts it: “calamity will promote blessing, blessing too underlies calamity...The right may turn out to be wrong, the good may turn out to be evil” and elsewhere: “the day everything is solved, you will find nothing is solved”.

The Indian praxis in the area of inter-state relations has been shaped since at least twenty three centuries by Chanakya's classic treatise, the *Arthashastra* but that seemingly amoral or even cynical description of the socio-political reality which predates Machiavelli's by eighteen hundred years must be seen in the context of *Rajniti* morals, including the popular books of fables for the education of princes, the *Panchatantra* and the *Hitopadesha*.

Thus we can find many definitions of essential concepts such as the forming and maintenance of alliances, the causes and conduct of war and the various types of peace (sixteen!) that may be sued for, the better ones being *upahara*, *sangata*, *pratikara* or *samyoga*, all based on regard for the mutual interests and common or respective goals of all parties. The best of all is based on the values of truth and morality leading



to mutual trust and disinterested solidarity while the most brittle and illusory sort of peace is that which consists in forcing the weaker party to condone and serve the goals and interests of the stronger one at its own visible or invisible detriment (*adrishtanara*) but all four means of luring or compelling the adversary into submission, though often inevitable, are never as valuable as free and clear-sighted adherence for, as the Hitopadesha says “Real success lies in peace”.

Too large an imbalance between powers is identified as a peril as the predominant agent will tend, absent wisdom, to attack and oppress the weaker ones as we have seen in recent years when the unipolar hegemon has followed that attractive but short-sighted logic. Sun Tzu, even though a military leader, also points out that the best victory is the one achieved without recourse to force, by persuasion and compromise. In our days we see the superpower and some smaller regimes allied to it use military means as a preferred option, also as a collective outcome of the individualistic ideal of the gunman settling in frontier lands and displacing or killing the native population while invoking theological or technocratic justifications.

A fool can be easily satisfied

While a wise man can be satisfied more easily

But even Brahma cannot please a person

Conceited with a little knowledge

Says the Hitopadesha

Is this “conceit with little knowledge” the tragedy of our technocratic age armed with many mistaken certainties and beliefs or prevented by institutional agnosticism from heeding the ageless message of wisdom?



Two seminal lessons are handed down by the Chinese and Indian political schools of thought, the first is that all actions carry their load of automatic effects and consequences across space and time, so that the use and abuse of power have an impact on the government and society that are responsible as much if not more than on those who are its subjects or victims:

He who wields and threatens to use nuclear weapons will be struck one day with nuclear weapons; he who is dependent on oil will see his ecosystem be ruined by oil; he who wastes resources will eventually endure scarcity and want and he who prints currency as if it were a virtual commodity- and no more as a mere legal tender - for the unbounded speculative pursuit of wealth will eventually experience hyperinflation, depression and insolvency, even though he may prosper for years off the work and assets of others bought against debt.

The second lesson is that in an expanding spiral of socio-political units, the smaller ones are subsumed in the larger ones which include them. The microcosm and macrocosm reflect one another but the latter cannot be sacrificed for the sake of the former that is a part of it.

The *Hitopadesha* says: “for the village, give up the individual, for the country the village, for the world the country and for supreme soul the world”. The expression “giving up” indicates the order of priority. In our age, we understand better than ever before that just as no region or town can do well within a ravaged or lawless country, likewise no country can lastingly prosper on a devastated planet or during a global war. Likewise all the material beings and goods that the earth enshrines are



not of higher import than the invisible, spiritual reality which makes them perceptible to us and which gives all of us our existence.

*Unsteady like the reflection of the moon
In the midst of water
Is indeed the life of living beings.
Therefore one should
Always do what is (universally) beneficial.
Hitopadesha*

The primacy of spirit over matter is affirmed as self-evident. Both Confucius and Lao Tzu agree with that order of priorities except that the first puts focus on the state whereas the second takes a shortcut from the individual to the universal being, reflecting that all intermediate units are taken care of as a result. The *Dao Deh Ch'ing* says: “man conforms to earth, the earth conforms to heaven, heaven conforms to Dao and the Dao follows the way of Nature”.

III- LESSONS FOR OUR WORLD

On both those yardsticks, the modern world falls terribly short. Nations do generally regard their interests, and especially as their “national security” as the supreme imperative, disregarding wider ecological and humanitarian concerns even when they profess a commitment to the “global community”.

The wars being pursued by the great powers are economic conflicts for creating or maintaining areas of influence in distant lands. Whether in Vietnam in the past, in Afghanistan and Iraq today or in Iran tomorrow. They are waged on the



orders of ruling, transnational oligarchies by professional armies of technicians and mercenaries and do not attract the support or even the approval of the populations on whose behalf they are officially conducted.

Most people don't understand the reasons for those wars of aggression and feel that they are kept in the dark about the real motivations of the instigators. They don't understand why Iran should be penalised, ostracized and even attacked on the suspicion that it may build nuclear weapons when other countries such as Israel and Pakistan are allowed to build nuclear arsenals undisturbed and even encouraged to do so by those who now clamour the need for non-proliferation while refusing to disarm themselves.

The main beneficiaries are the military industrial complexes of the more economically "advanced" nations. However much governments try to keep those unpopular conflicts and occupations out of the minds of their citizens, they are inevitably and negatively affected by them as they fall into massive indebtedness and gradually turn into militaristic police states faced with rising domestic alienation and opposition while being confronted by a growing number of enemies abroad. We witness a sobering illustration of the law of cause and effect (the Taoist *Deh*, the Indian *Karma*) in the contemporary scenario. The United States, as the predominant military power and belligerent is under the pall of civil unrest and popular revolt and many other nations face similar risks.

Foreign policy inevitably reflects the internal state of a nation as both the Chinese and Indian classics have pointed out. When it is in disarray and rapidly decaying, its diplomacy cannot be



consistent, principled, reasonable, just and firm. A state which intends to control or exert a determinant influence on other nations while it is not able to maintain order and protect its prosperity within must be told: “Physician, heal thyself!”

Another effect of this situation is visible in the widening chasm between the public discourse of governments and the mainstream media on the one hand and popular perceptions and suspicions about the current economic, ecological and political realities on the other. The proliferation of “conspiracy theories” mainly in Western nations – about the real reasons and factors behind the Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq war, the assassinations of John F Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the 11th September 2001 attacks in New York and Washington DC and so on – is a direct result of the loss of faith in political systems and the evidence of official mendacity and deception.

Its notion of ‘manifest destiny’ has led the United States to claim and exercise paramount authority, alone or within a western alliance of nations, over the rest of the world and inevitably, the call for a multipolar order, recognizing the diverse plurality of mankind is rising against that challenge. The ancient social and political sciences of China and India, fed by the combined observation of cosmic and human nature which they see as one and the same, can light our path towards a new ecologically thriving and socially harmonious world order.

THE END

