Kautilya and the War for the "Mindscapes"

The battlefield has moved into perception itself, and India's oldest strategist offers its sharpest diagnosis.



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We once measured war through geography: coordinates, formations, borders, and territory won or lost. That physical certainty has thinned. A video crosses a frontier in the time it takes to press "share"; a doctored image earns credibility through repetition; a rumor moves a population before a government can check the facts. None of it requires a soldier to cross a line on a map.

The consequential shift is not merely from physical to digital warfare, but from territorial battle spaces to borderless *mindscapes*. A mindscape is not contained by sovereignty. It has no checkpoint, Line of Actual Control, or international boundary. It is constituted by memories, fears, prejudices, aspirations, and identities, all of which are reached, measured, and manipulated through devices sitting in millions of homes.

India carries the weight of this shift acutely. With nearly a billion wireless internet subscribers, India's telecommunications system describes something larger than a market; it functions as a national nervous system. Villages, cities, armed forces, universities, and political communities are connected to a single information environment where local events become national conversations within minutes.

What happens when the target of an attack is not a state's capacity to fight, but its willingness to fight, its judgment, its social cohesion, and its grip on truth?

The oldest answer is among the most precise. In the *Arthasastra, Kautilya* places war (vigraha) among the six instruments of statecraft (*sadgunya*) and defines it simply as *apakara*, meaning the doing of injury, rather than physical annihilation. He separates open war (*prakasayuddha*) from two quieter forms: *kutayuddha* (the war of concealment and deceit) and *tusnimyuddha* (silent war waged through covert means). Not every war begins with an explosion; some begin by altering the conditions under which an adversary thinks and decides.

Kautilya was candid about where the real wound is inflicted:

एकं हन्यान्न वा हन्यादिषुः क्षिप्तो धनुष्मता।
प्रज्ञानेन तु मतिः क्षिप्ता हन्याद्गर्भगतानपि।।

"An arrow loosed by an archer may kill one man, or none; but intellect, rightly aimed, can destroy even the unborn." (Arthasastra 10.6.51)

Read with a screen in mind, the aphorism loses its metaphorical distance. The arrow represents kinetic force, whereas the aimed intellect is the crafted narrative, the manipulated image, or the carefully timed rumor.

Kautilya's framework directs attention away from the message alone and toward the condition of the target. He opens his discussion of *kutayuddha* not simply with deception, but with *vyasana*, referring to the internal calamities, grievances, and weaknesses afflicting the state. A divided military, an alienated population, or declining confidence in leadership are attack surfaces of the national mindscape.

Reducing cognitive warfare to "disinformation" misses this dynamic. A falsehood requires a receptive environment. The strategic objective is often not to make a population believe a specific lie but to render them uncertain about every competing account of reality. Persuading citizens that *nothing* is true causes cognitive exhaustion, societal fragmentation, and strategic paralysis. Research on cognitive warfare echoes this reality: the objective is not merely to change what people think but how they think and act, ultimately fracturing the collective will to resist.

India has already glimpsed this environment. AI-generated deepfakes of prominent figures during general elections demonstrate how technology has lowered the cost of personalised persuasion at scale. The primary danger is an asymmetry of speed: a synthetic video takes minutes to produce, hours to verify, days to correct, and years to repair the damaged trust. During military confrontations, fabricated statements or manipulated media influence not just public sentiment but also the rapid calculations of commanders and diplomats. Because digital narratives lack logistical range limits, foreign influence can easily loop through global platforms to appear as independent local opinion. A case in point is the fabricated narrative spread by Pakistan with the help of collaborators and a web of bots in different countries, during and after Operation Sindoor.

Kautilya's concept of *bheda* (division) becomes vital here. An adversary rarely needs to invent new conflicts; it merely identifies existing fault lines (such as caste, region, language, ideology, or economic anxiety) and widens them. Combined, *tusnimyuddha* and *kutayuddha* form a modern ecosystem of botnets, synthetic media, and algorithms that industrialises covert influence. Generative AI accelerates this shift from mass propaganda to mass-personalised persuasion, targeting the individual who acts simultaneously as consumer, validator, and amplifier.

This reality reveals why cognitive resilience differs fundamentally from cybersecurity. A firewall blocks a data packet, but a citizen cannot be firewalled from an idea. A platform can remove an account, but it cannot remove the underlying grievance that gave it an audience. Fact-checks clarify reality, but they do not automatically restore eroded institutional trust.

India is moving beyond content moderation toward structural cognitive resilience. This requires anticipating informational vulnerabilities before crises occur, establishing rapid channels for authoritative truth, fostering media literacy, and integrating the information domain directly into defence and diplomatic planning.

Above all, it requires strengthening the core social conditions that render manipulation ineffective. Kautilya's statecraft emphasised evaluating *prakrti* (the constituent elements of the state) and prioritising *mantrasakti*, which is the power of counsel, deliberation, and intellect over mere material force. In an era of abundant information but scarce clarity, the challenge is maintaining the capacity to distinguish signal from noise, evidence from assertion, and deliberate manipulation from honest debate.

The contest over mindscapes is ultimately a contest over agency. Who determines what a society fears, notices, or believes? Who decides which version of an event is credible, and whether citizens can trust one another when narratives clash?

India is continously patrolling its land borders, maritime routes, and digital networks. But alongside them exists an invisible, continuous battlespace where perception moves faster than armies. For an open democracy, building an impermeable wall around the national mind is not an option, nor is it something India aspires to. Instead, India's resilience relies on an informed citizenry and cohesive public discourse that naturally neutralises divisive influence. Kautilya understood that the most efficient victory compels an adversary to weaken itself. As the frontier shifts from physical lines to human perception, defending the mindscape becomes the ultimate strategic imperative.

Fable with Moral

Nachiketa and the Lord of Death

(Katha Upanishad)



Long ago, the sage Vajashravas resolved to perform a great sacrifice and give away all he possessed. Yet he offered only old, milkless cows. His young son Nachiketa, possessing a pure heart and sharp mind, watched with quiet distress. Knowing that such a sacrifice demanded the gift of everything, the boy approached his father and asked, "father, to whom will you give me?"

Twice the question went unanswered. The third time, Vajashravas, shouted with anger, "I give you to Yama, the God of Death!"

True to his father's word, Nachiketa journeyed to the realm of death. Yama was away, and none dared admit the boy. For three days Nachiketa waited at the gate without food or water. When Yama returned and saw the young boy, he was filled with regret. He said, "child, I have wronged you by keeping you waiting. Ask of me three boons."

First Nachiketa prayed, "may my father's anger vanish, and may he receive me happily when I return." Yama granted it at once.

For the second boon Nachiketa asked to be taught the proper ritual of the fire sacrifice. Yama instructed him and invited the third request.

Nachiketa asked, "Is there life beyond death? What is the truth?"

Yama hesitated. Even the gods, he said, were uncertain on this matter. He offered the boy long life, wealth, power, and every earthly pleasure if only he would choose another gift. But Nachiketa stood firm. "All these are fleeting," he answered. "They cannot give lasting happiness. I seek only the eternal."

Seeing the boy's resolve, Yama finally spoke: "The self is immortal. It is neither born nor does it die. It does not come from anything, nor does anything come from it. When the body falls, the self remains. He who thinks he slays, and he who thinks he is slain, both are mistaken, for the self neither kills nor is killed.

"Smaller than the smallest, greater than the greatest, the self dwells in every being. It cannot be grasped by argument, intellect, or learning; it reveals itself only to the pure and deserving.

Thus, the young seeker received the eternal wisdom.

Moral of the fable: With determination, one can achieve any goal

Did you know?



The Battle of Saraighat was as much a riverine-security operation as a land battle

The Battle of Saraighat (1671), fought between the Ahoms of Assam and the Mughal Empire, is often remembered as a heroic military victory. But it was not merely a battle on land-it was also a brilliant example of riverine security and strategic defence.

The conflict centred on the Brahmaputra, the great river that shaped the geography, economy and security of Assam. The Ahoms understood that control of the river was essential. Instead of relying only on open land warfare, they used the river as a defensive shield and organised their resistance around boats, river patrols, fortified positions and intimate knowledge of local waterways. Under the leadership of Lachit Borphukan, the Ahoms prevented the Mughal forces from fully exploiting their numerical strength and war resources.

The Ahoms' lighter and more mobile river craft, combined with their knowledge of currents, channels and riverbanks, gave them a major advantage. The battle therefore illustrates an important lesson in national security: successful defence depends not only on bravery, but also on adapting strategy to geography.

The Ahom victory at Saraighat halted the Mughal advance into Assam and preserved Ahom control over the Brahmaputra Valley.

Wisdom Word Search

A	A	N	T	A	R	I	K	A	V	R	J	N	R	
S	U	R	A	K	S	H	A	G	B	A	D	S	A	
A	A	U	R	A	K	S	H	A	O	A	Q	U	S	
P	K	R	D	H	I	S	H	A	N	T	I	S	H	
H	A	P	V	S	P	O	E	B	I	A	L	A	T	
I	J	D	A	A	I	S	A	L	K	N	A	N	R	
P	O	I	O	Y	B	F	W	V	A	K	C	G	A	
A	I	A	Y	S	T	H	A	K	A	V	F	A	N	
T	W	M	H	I	H	I	A	V	A	A	Z	T	I	
E	S	K	A	M	K	I	T	U	A	A	D	T	R	
Y	X	C	Q	R	O	G	O	R	M	D	A	A	M	
R	A	S	H	T	R	I	Y	A	T	A	E	N	A	
Q	S	A	R	V	A	S	A	M	M	A	T	I	N	
L	R	A	S	H	T	R	I	Y	A	Z	Q	V	O	
O	S	U	R	A	K	S	H	A	F	X	S	B	A	

WORDS TO FIND

Aantarik Suraksha, Aatankvaad, Padoshio, Rashtriya Suraksha, Rashtranirman, Rashtriyata, Sarvabhaumatva, Shanti, Susangatta, Sarvasammati.

THE WISDOM LEXICON

AANTARIK SURAKSHA: The maintenance of public order, law enforcement, and civil safety within the geographical borders of the nation.

AATANKVAAD: The systematic use of violence, fear, and coercion against civilians or state authorities to achieve political, ideological, or religious objectives.

PADOSHIO: Bordering nations or communities whose geographical closeness requires diplomatic balance, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence.

RASHTRIYA SURAKSHA: The preservation of a nation's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and institutions against external threats and internal disruptions.

RASHTRANIRMAN: The deliberate process of constructing a cohesive national identity and resilient public institutions that foster collective progress.

RASHTRIYATA: The legal status and sense of belonging that ties an individual to a specific nation, defining mutual civic rights and responsibilities

SARVABHAUMATVA: Supreme and independent power or authority vested in a state to govern its territory and people without external control.

SHANTI: A state of social stability, concord, and freedom from war, conflict, or systemic civil violence.

SUSANGATTA: The quality of social unity, solidarity, and mutual connection that holds diverse communities together as a harmonious whole.

SARVASAMMATI: Broad, collective agreement and shared understanding reached among diverse stakeholders through deliberation and compromise.

Note: These terms come from Gujarati, one of India's 22 Scheduled Languages.

Marvels of India

KALINJAR FORT



Geostrategic Sentinel of the Deccan Gateway

Rising over 1,200 feet atop an isolated Vindhya hill in the Banda district of UP overlooking the Bundelkhand plains, Kalinjar Fort served as a natural sentinel guarding routes between Northern Bharat and the Deccan. Historian Syed Ali Nadeem Rezavi notes it was "the great barrier for ambitious invaders/rulers aiming towards the south."

Engineering Deterrence

Nearly a mile long, ringed by massive stone ramparts and seven successive fortified gateways, its Chandela builders (9th-13th centuries CE) designed a layered defence that forced attackers through successive chokepoints. It was a strategy of attrition rather than a defensible wall.

Tested Against Invasions

In 1023 CE, Mahmud of Ghazni's siege ended not in conquest but in a negotiated tribute because of the fort's impenetrability; in 1531, Humayun accepted submission rather than storming the fort; and in 1545, Sher Shah Suri, his time's most capable military strategist, died from wounds sustained while besieging its walls.

Enduring Lesson

Kalinjar illustrates how terrain, layered fortification and calculated resilience combined into a durable security doctrine: a template still instructive for understanding indigenous approaches to defence.

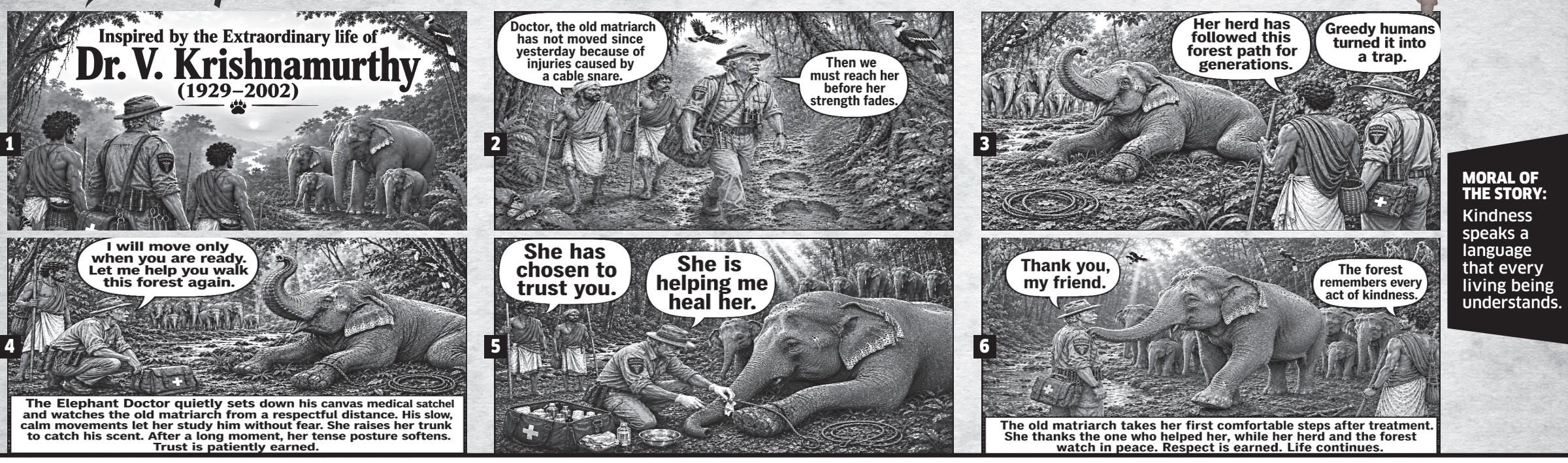
QUIZ National Security

	Questions	Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D
1	Historically, which of these war animals were given herbal brews or spirits before the battle to increase rage?				
2	How were carrier pigeons and trained birds primarily utilized within the intelligence matrix of the Mauryan Empire?	Breaking enemy cavalry during battle	Detecting toxic gases in siege tunnels	Dropping lethal chemicals in the enemy territory	Transmitting encrypted messages across zones
3	According to ancient treatises on military veterinary science, what was a mandatory defensive measure for war elephants before the battle?	Fasting them for 2 days to increase rage	Bathing them properly with scented herbal soaps	Nullifying their peripheral vision with blinders	Letting them free into the forest for a day
4	Which of these were thrown in sealed earthenware pots over fortress walls to terrorise and bite besieged forces?	Snakes	Crabs	Ants	Cockroaches

Answers: 1 - A, 2 - D, 3 - B, 4 - A

biographical folklore

The Elephant Doctor



MORAL OF THE STORY: Kindness speaks a language that every living being understands.