

From Troy to Kurukshetra: The Timeless Art of Subversive Diplomacy

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I. Introduction:

Diplomacy, often regarded as the art of resolving disputes through negotiation, has long intertwined with strategies of subversion. From ancient myths to modern geopolitics, the use of covert tactics to achieve overt objectives has remained a cornerstone of political manoeuvring. Mythologies

s, in particular, provide timeless insights into these strategies, serving as allegories for the complexities of power and conflict. The Greek tale of the Trojan Horse and Krishna's counsel during the Mahabharata are two enduring examples that highlight the intricate dance between ethics and pragmatism in subversive diplomacy.

In Greek mythology, the Trojan Horse epitomises the power of deception in warfare. It was a calculated ruse that allowed the Greeks to penetrate the fortified city of Troy after years of stalemate, showcasing how ingenuity can prevail over brute force. Similarly, Krishna's strategic advice to the Pandavas during the Mahabharata underscores the role of subversion in achieving justice. From advising the concealment of truths to leveraging psychological tactics against formidable opponents, Krishna's counsel illustrates the ethical dilemmas of using deception for a righteous cause. Both narratives highlight the enduring tension between morality and necessity in the pursuit of larger goals.

This research examines these mythological archetypes of subversive diplomacy and their resonance with contemporary international relations. From Cold War espionage to disinformation campaigns in the digital age, the principles reflected in the Trojan Horse and Krishna's strategies continue to influence covert diplomatic practices. By juxtaposing these ancient stories with modern case studies, this paper seeks to illuminate how mythology serves not only as a historical record but also as a guide to understanding the timeless dynamics of trust, power, and deception in global politics.

Key words: *Diplomacy Subversive Diplomacy Realism Strategy Power Mythology International Relations Warfare*

What is Subversive Diplomacy?

Subversive diplomacy refers to the use of covert, indirect, or manipulative tactics by one country to influence, undermine, or destabilise another country or its leadership without engaging in open conflict. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which focuses on open negotiations and agreements, subversive diplomacy operates in the shadows, relying on methods like spreading misinformation, supporting opposition groups, funding propaganda, or conducting espionage. The goal is often to weaken an adversary's political, economic, or social stability while advancing the subverter's strategic interests.

This type of diplomacy often blurs the line between soft power and covert aggression. For example, during the Cold War, both the U.S. and the Soviet Union engaged in subversive diplomacy by secretly supporting rebel groups, orchestrating coups, or influencing public opinion through propaganda in other countries.

Subversive diplomacy is subtle and strategic, using non-military tools to achieve goals that might otherwise require open confrontation. Its success relies on secrecy and plausible deniability, making it a powerful yet controversial tool in international relations.

Mythological Foundations of Subversive Diplomacy: Parallel between Greek and Indian Mythology

The Trojan Horse in Greek Mythology:

The story of the Trojan Horse is one of the most iconic tales of Greek mythology, illustrating how deception can be a powerful tool in both warfare and diplomacy. The tale is recounted in Virgil's *Aeneid* and other ancient texts, describing how the Greeks, after a decade of siege against the city of Troy, resorted to a cunning stratagem to achieve victory. Unable to breach Troy's formidable walls through conventional means, the Greeks pretended to abandon the war, leaving behind a massive wooden horse as a supposed offering to the gods. The Trojans, interpreting the gesture as a symbol of surrender and divine favour, brought the horse within their city walls. Unbeknownst to them, the hollow structure concealed Greek soldiers who emerged at night, opened Troy's gates for the returning Greek forces, and led to the city's downfall.

Deception as a Military and Diplomatic Tool

The success of Odysseus' strategy lay in its brilliance and audacity, using deception as both a military tactic and a form of psychological warfare. On one hand, the Trojan Horse was a ruse designed to bypass the military defences of Troy. On the other hand, it operated as a form of subversive diplomacy, manipulating the Trojans' trust and exploiting their desire for peace and divine approval. By capitalising on human psychology and cultural beliefs, Odysseus orchestrated a manoeuvre that effectively blurred the boundaries between strategy, diplomacy, and outright deceit. This act was not merely about winning a battle but also about ending a protracted conflict with minimal additional bloodshed—a goal often sought in diplomatic resolutions, albeit through more transparent means.

The Trojan Horse symbolises the complex interplay of trust and betrayal in human interactions, particularly in the realms of war and diplomacy. It represents the vulnerability that arises when trust is misplaced or manipulated, as seen in the Trojans' decision to accept the horse without scrutiny. The episode also highlights the thin line between diplomatic strategy and acts of war. While Odysseus' deception ultimately brought about peace for the Greeks, it did so at the cost of immense betrayal and destruction for the Trojans. In modern contexts, the story serves as a cautionary tale about the ethical dilemmas and consequences of subversion in diplomacy, reminding us that strategies rooted in deceit may achieve short-term success but often carry long-term repercussions in trust and stability.

Krishna's Counsel in the Mahabharata: Strategy and Guile

In the Mahabharata, Lord Krishna plays a pivotal role as both a mentor and a strategist, advising the Pandavas on how to navigate the complex battlefield of war and politics. One of Krishna's most important contributions is his counsel on the use of strategy and guile to overcome the seemingly insurmountable might of the Kauravas. This is especially evident in the cases of Karna and Dronacharya, two of the most formidable warriors on the Kaurava side. Krishna advises Arjuna to exploit the vulnerabilities of these warriors, advocating for their defeat not through brute force alone, but through strategic cunning. For example, when Karna is stripped of his armour and weapons in the middle of battle, Krishna encourages Arjuna to take advantage of this moment, leading to Karna's death. Similarly, Krishna orchestrates the killing of Dronacharya by advising the Pandavas to deceive Drona into believing that his son, Ashwatthama, is dead. Krishna's guidance in these cases emphasises the use of strategic intelligence and psychological warfare, aligning with the idea that subversive tactics can be crucial in achieving victory in situations where direct confrontation may not suffice.

Krishna as a Diplomat: Wisdom and Subversion for Larger Goals

Krishna's role in the Mahabharata is not confined to being a mere warrior; he is a master diplomat who understands the complexities of human nature, political manoeuvring, and the delicate balance of power. His guidance to the Pandavas goes beyond battlefield tactics; it is rooted in achieving a larger, divine purpose—the restoration of dharma (righteousness) and the defeat of Adharma (unrighteousness). Krishna's diplomacy is subversive in nature because it often involves indirect methods, such as deception, manipulation, and psychological warfare, to ensure the ultimate triumph of the Pandavas. His diplomatic strategies are exemplified in his negotiations with the Kauravas before the war, where he offers peace to Duryodhana and attempts to prevent the war through dialogue. However, when diplomacy fails, Krishna resorts to more covert tactics to tilt the balance of power in favour of the Pandavas. His wisdom, rooted in understanding the moral complexities of war and diplomacy, allows him to use subversion to achieve a righteous outcome, even if it means bending traditional notions of fairness and honour.

Ethical Dilemmas in Using Subversion for a Just Cause

The use of subversive tactics by Krishna raises significant ethical questions, particularly regarding the tension between means and ends. Krishna's advice to the Pandavas, while ultimately leading to the defeat of the Kauravas and the restoration of dharma, challenges the traditional moral framework of what is just and righteous. The killing of Karna, for instance, is seen as morally ambiguous, as it takes place under deceptive circumstances—Karna is caught off-guard, unarmed, and vulnerable, which some critics argue is a dishonourable way to kill a warrior. Similarly, the deceitful killing of Dronacharya, where the Pandavas create the false impression of the death of Drona's son, raises questions about the ethics of using lies to achieve a just cause. Krishna's actions highlight a key dilemma in the use of subversion: Can morally questionable tactics be justified if the ultimate goal is considered just? While Krishna advocates for these subversive actions to uphold dharma, his counsel also reflects the complicated nature of warfare and diplomacy, where ethical boundaries are often blurred in the pursuit of a greater good. These ethical dilemmas mirror the challenges faced by modern diplomats and leaders who must often choose between idealism and pragmatism when navigating complex political or military situations. The Mahabharata, through Krishna's actions, offers a profound exploration of the moral challenges inherent in achieving just outcomes through subversive means.

Subversive Diplomacy in the Modern World: Case Studies

1. Operation Ajax (1953): Operation Ajax is a classic case of subversive diplomacy, where covert actions were used by the CIA to overthrow the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammad Mossadegh, in 1953. Mossadegh had nationalized Iran's oil industry, which angered Britain and threatened U.S. interests in the region. The British, who had economic ties to the Iranian oil industry through the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (later BP), sought U.S. support to remove Mossadegh from power. The CIA, under the direction of the Eisenhower administration, launched a covert operation that involved bribing key political figures, creating civil unrest, and spreading anti-Mossadegh propaganda. The operation also used subversive diplomacy by supporting a coup while maintaining a façade of non-involvement. CIA operatives manipulated the media, staged protests, and funded opposition groups to build public pressure against Mossadegh. Within days, Mossadegh was removed from office, and the monarchy of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was restored to power, with the backing of the U.S. and Britain. Operation Ajax is an example of subversive diplomacy where the U.S. used covert means to influence the internal politics of a sovereign nation, under the guise of promoting stability and preventing the spread of communism, but in reality, securing control over Iranian oil resources. This event has had long-lasting effects on U.S.-Iran relations and is often cited as a key factor in the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

2. Cuban Missile Crisis: The Cuban Missile Crisis stands as one of the most significant instances of subversive diplomacy in modern history, where covert and strategic diplomacy played a pivotal role in averting nuclear conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. The crisis began in October 1962, when the U.S. discovered Soviet missile sites being constructed in Cuba, just 90 miles from Florida. The Soviets, under Nikita Khrushchev, had placed these missiles as a response to U.S. missiles stationed in Turkey and Italy, and to protect Cuba after the failed U.S.-backed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. President John F. Kennedy and his administration initially responded with a public display of military readiness, including a naval blockade of Cuba, to force the Soviets into dismantling the missile sites. However, beneath the surface, Kennedy and Khrushchev engaged in a delicate and highly subversive diplomatic negotiation through backchannels. Secretly, Kennedy agreed to remove U.S. missiles from Turkey in exchange for the Soviet withdrawal of missiles from Cuba. The subversion here was in the fact that the two superpowers engaged in backdoor diplomacy to resolve a crisis that could have escalated into World War III. Both sides kept the agreement secret, as Kennedy feared political backlash for conceding to Soviet demands. This strategic use of subversive diplomacy, where both sides used indirect methods and secret concessions to avoid direct confrontation, ultimately led to a peaceful resolution of the crisis.

3. The 2023-2024 Israel-Hamas Conflict: Covert Operations and Diplomatic Subversion: One of the recent examples of subversive diplomacy can be seen in the Israel-Hamas conflict that escalated in October 2023, when Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israel, triggering one of the most intense and devastating escalations in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Following the attacks, Israel responded with extensive military operations aimed at dismantling Hamas's infrastructure in Gaza. The conflict, which has historical, political, and territorial roots, also saw significant covert diplomatic actions on multiple fronts, primarily involving the role of regional powers and external actors. Behind the scenes, subversive diplomacy was employed by various nations in the Middle East and beyond, influencing the trajectory of the conflict. For instance, Qatar and Turkey, both of which have maintained relationships with Hamas, utilized backchannel diplomacy to try to de-escalate tensions, pushing for ceasefire agreements while offering humanitarian aid to Gaza. These efforts were often conducted secretly to avoid antagonizing Israel and its allies, such as the United States, which maintained strong support for Israel's military operations. Similarly, Iran, a major regional power that has been accused of funding Hamas and other militant groups in the region, used its influence in subtle ways, offering both military aid to Hamas and

diplomatic backing through proxies. However, these actions were generally cloaked in ambiguity, and public statements from Iran were carefully crafted to maintain strategic ambiguity and avoid direct confrontation with Israel or Western powers. At the same time, Israel's diplomatic strategy relied heavily on a combination of military pressure, intelligence-sharing, and covert cyber operations. Israel used its intelligence network to track Hamas operatives and their activities, while also engaging in diplomatic subversion by pressuring its allies to limit diplomatic and financial support to Gaza, seeking to isolate Hamas politically. The U.S. and European countries were caught in the delicate position of supporting Israel's right to self-defence while also pushing for humanitarian access and a long-term solution, making the entire situation a complex web of covert diplomatic actions, behind-the-scenes negotiations, and shifting alliances. The Israel-Hamas conflict in 2023-2024 exemplifies how subversive diplomacy is not limited to classic espionage or secret negotiations but extends to manipulating regional alliances, using humanitarian concerns as leverage, and engaging in information warfare. These covert actions, while serving national security or political interests, also highlight the blurred line between diplomatic engagement, military action, and the use of soft power in contemporary global conflicts.

Realism Unveiled: Subversive Tactics, Mythology to Modern Diplomacy

In both mythology and modern diplomacy, the themes of power and national interest dominate the strategic decision-making of states and individuals, often guiding the use of subversion as a necessary tool. In Indian mythology, the Mahabharata presents a powerful exploration of how the pursuit of dharma (righteousness) and the assertion of national interests often necessitate the use of subversive tactics. Lord Krishna's guidance to the Pandavas demonstrates that in the face of injustice and the need to protect the greater good, power must be wielded pragmatically, even if it means employing deception and manipulation. The Pandavas, despite being morally upright, must use subversive means like the killing of key warriors (Karna and Dronacharya) to ensure their victory and reclaim the throne. This exemplifies the view that in a world where competing interests and power struggles are inevitable, subversion is not only a tool of survival but a necessary instrument to restore order and uphold righteousness.

Similarly, in Greek mythology, the Trojan Horse strategy used by the Greeks underscores how the quest for power and the protection of national interests often justify the use of covert and subversive methods. The Trojan Horse is a symbol of how the pursuit of victory and national interests in an anarchic environment (a world without a central authority or rule) demands subversive tactics to tip the balance of power in favor of the state. The Trojans, believing they had won, let their guard down, which allowed the Greeks to strike. This mirrors real-world diplomacy, where nations often use subversion to achieve strategic goals in a system where power is distributed and no global authority exists to mediate conflicts.

In the modern international system, subversion remains an essential tool in an anarchic world order, where there is no overarching global government to enforce rules and ensure stability. **Realpolitik** often drives state behaviour, as nations act in pursuit of their own national interests and seek to maximise their power, even if that means engaging in covert operations, espionage, or misinformation campaigns. Examples such as the Cuban Missile Crisis or Operation Ajax reveal how superpowers, unable to rely on international institutions to resolve disputes, employ subversive methods to protect their strategic interests. The **anarchic nature of international relations**, where power and sovereignty are central, compels nations to utilise indirect methods like economic sanctions, covert diplomacy, and military subversion to counter perceived threats. Just as in ancient myths where deception was used to tilt the balance of power in favour of one party, modern diplomacy similarly employs subversion as a means to achieve a strategic advantage, highlighting the enduring relevance of these tactics in an inherently unstable world.

Subversive Tactics and Mythology: A Timeless Guide to Statecraft and Diplomacy

The intricate dance of power, influence, and deception has been a constant theme throughout human history. From the ancient tales of gods and heroes to the complex geopolitical landscape of the modern world, the art of subversion has been employed to shape nations and alter the course of events. By delving into the rich tapestry of mythology and analysing contemporary examples, we can uncover the enduring relevance of subversive tactics as a tool for statecraft and diplomacy.

Relevance of Subversive Tactics in the Modern World

In the modern era, the principles of subversion continue to be employed by nations and individuals seeking to gain an advantage. One prominent example is the use of disinformation and propaganda to manipulate public opinion and undermine democratic institutions. By disseminating false information and sowing discord, adversaries can erode trust, polarise societies, and destabilise governments.

Cyber warfare, another powerful tool of subversion, allows nations to attack critical infrastructure, steal sensitive information, and disrupt economic activity. By exploiting vulnerabilities in computer systems, cyberattacks can inflict significant damage, often without leaving a physical trace.

Economic sanctions and embargoes are also frequently used as a means of exerting pressure on other countries. By restricting trade and financial flows, nations can weaken their adversaries and force them to comply with their demands. However, such tactics can also have unintended consequences, such as harming innocent civilians and fueling economic instability.

The Timeless Wisdom of Myth:

In conclusion, mythology serves as an effective learning tool for statecraft and diplomacy by offering timeless lessons in power dynamics, strategic deception, and the delicate balance between ethics and necessity. Through mythological narratives like the Mahabharata and the Trojan Horse, we learn that diplomacy often requires a subtle blend of moral ambiguity, tactical cunning, and the manipulation of public perception to achieve national objectives.

These stories transcend cultural and temporal boundaries, demonstrating that the principles of subversive diplomacy—whether through indirect negotiation, covert operations, or strategic alliances—are universal. By drawing parallels between mythological wisdom and real-world diplomatic practices, policymakers can gain invaluable insights into the complexities of modern diplomacy, understanding that, much like in ancient times, the pursuit of national interest often demands ingenuity, resilience, and an awareness of the fine line between diplomacy and deceit.

Mythology, often dismissed as mere fantasy, offers a profound reservoir of knowledge about human nature, societal dynamics, and the strategies employed to gain power and influence. These ancient stories, passed down through generations, encapsulate truths about the human condition, providing valuable insights into the psychology of individuals and groups.