

## APPLICATION OF SUN TZU'S PRINCIPLES TO MODERN WARFARE

### **Introduction**

Within an armed conflict the warring sides implement their respective approved plans of action prepared by military strategists and commanders. Among them are the Sun Tzu's principles, formulated by a Chinese military strategist and philosopher who lived in the 5th or 6th century.<sup>1</sup> His views on military strategy are expounded in a classical book called "The Art of War." The complex nature of contemporary battle, shifting geopolitics, and technological change make it crucial to consider Sun's ideas for practical application today. This can offer a more comprehensive approach to modern-day combat strategies; they incorporate these principles in military doctrines and tactics. These principles could be applied in modern-day situations and have proven relevant to the changing war conditions throughout generations. While the nature of conflicts has changed, technology has evolved, and new actors have entered the stage, Sun Tzu's strategic intelligence remains intellectually timeless and is adaptable to today's military challenges.

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<sup>1</sup> Bao, B.L., 2021. Global Perspectives on Smart-Power Strategy in International Arena: Critical Discovery into Philosophy of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu from Strategic Implications. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies*, 3(9), pp.09-22

## **Principles of Sun Tzu and Application to Modern Warfare**

### **Economic Consideration**

Economic consideration is the initial applicable principle. This was about economic warfare targeting the enemy's resources – their time, money, policy, and energy – to gain superiority. The aim is to destroy the enemy's fighting spirit before combat has even begun. These are traded policies, sanctions, cyber economic warfare, lawfare and humanitarian, world economic institutions, and other economic devices. Trade policies are designed to undermine the economic prosperity of opponents through the use of trade restrictions that impede the growth of the opponents' economy and limit their funding sources. Sanctions target states through confiscation of their assets, travel restrictions, prohibiting certain transactions, and trade embargoes. Cyber-economic warfare targets the adversaries' industrial facilities, financial systems, and critical infrastructure. In humanitarian lawfare, states use human rights and international law to pressure adversaries on perceived violations, sanctions, and imposition of restrictions.

### **Adaptability and Flexibility**

Concerning the principle of Adaptability and flexibility, Sun Tzu draws attention to the importance of being flexible as a key to success. This principle aligns suitably with modern warfare's ever-changing nature, ranging from geopolitical landscapes to technology and tactics. In modern warfare, this principle has been utilized by adjusting strategies on the battlefield, tailoring an approach based on terrain, overall environment, and weather, ensuring the relevance of the military planning in war, understanding the changing nature of conflict, seizing opportunities when the enemy is vulnerable, changing strategies mid-course, evaluating rewards

and risks of a course of action, learning from experience, and balancing consistency and flexibility. In summary, even today this principle is relevant because it recommends that military leaders should not be rigid in their responses to evolving situations on the battlefield.

### **Intelligence and Reconnaissance**

The third principle is the principle of intelligence and surveillance. This principle emphasizes the paramount value of knowing the enemy and oneself through military exploration of the area to gather information on terrain, civil activities, and enemy forces that aid in the re-evaluation of the strategies to be utilized.<sup>2</sup> In modern warfare, this principle is applied through advances in scouting technologies, surveillance, and intelligence, which have immensely enhanced the ability to gather crucial information in alignment with understanding the battlefield.

### **Deception and Misdirection**

The principle of deception and misdirection aims to mislead the enemy, create confusion, and gain strategic advantage. This principle is emphasized in the following contexts of modern warfare: the creation of illusions and the blurring of the gap between reality and fiction, which disorient the opponent. This creates an uphill task of knowing the potential capabilities and true intentions of the other force, intentionally leaking misleading information to the enemy, entailing fake troop movement, false intelligence, and trails aimed at leading the opponent into their traps of assumptions.

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew, C. *The Art of War and the Arthashastra: How China and India Took an Early Lead over Greece and Rome. The Secret World: A History of Intelligence* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2018) pp. 54-69.

The principle is also emphasized in the context of creating fear and uncertainty in the enemy ranks, leading to their hesitation, hasty movements, decisions, and a breakdown in morale.<sup>3</sup> False alarms and distractions divert the enemy's attention far from one's true aim, drawing the enemy to unplanned responses and maneuvers and masking intentions, as suggested by Sun Tzu, appearing weak when strong and strong when weak. This deceptive physiological warfare misleads the opponent of the likelihood of winning a war. Applicability of this principle in modern warfare requires an extensive understanding of strategic and physiological dynamics at play in any warfare.

### **Strategic Planning and Timing**

Regarding the principle of strategic planning and timing, Sun Tzu describes it as a timely execution of actions through seizing opportunities at the optimal moment. Before engaging in any action, planning carefully, selecting the right time to execute the action, and assessing the options to the enemy in a disadvantage is vital. This principle is articulated in the approach of evaluating opportunities. This entails assessing the circumstances, recognizing weaknesses in the enemy's defenses, and recognizing the opportune moment to execute decisive action against the weaknesses in the enemy's defenses.

Such an approach also incorporates careful planning prior to the execution of an action by exploiting vulnerability along the adversary's weak lines using a detailed assessment that draws reference to the environment of operation (terrain), as well as the strengths and weaknesses of adversaries and their forces. Modern military tactics require an intensive study of enemy weaknesses that involve intelligence gathering, computerized surveillance, plus satellite images

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<sup>3</sup> Tzu, S., 2021. The Concept of Deception and Its Applicability in India-China Framework. *Centre for Land Warfare Studies*, (298), pp.1-13.p.30

for the purpose of making informed decisions.<sup>4</sup> This intelligence gathering should help the development of up-to-date military theories, emphasizing strategic goals over meaningless information gathering. In the case of modern asymmetric warfare that is hybrid, one must consider unusual challenges in strategic planning and prioritize information warfare, counterinsurgency, and cyber defense.

Additionally, the principle is compatible with hybrid modern warfare, entailing tactical withdrawals, grouping, and fine-tuning methods that are equally applicable in both advances and retreats. Also, the principle is compatible with hybrid modern warfare that involves a withdrawal, gathering up, and reassessment of strategy, which are important components of contemporary offenses and defenses.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the pinnacle of modern intel-based warfare consists of knowing both yours and your adversary's weaknesses and strengths.

### **Winning without Fighting**

The principle of winning without fighting is backed up by Sun Tzu's statement, "To fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the most significant victory should be achieved without direct conflict engagement.<sup>78</sup> In present-day this should be done by leveraging diplomacy, outsmarting the opponent, and creating strategic advantages. Soft power

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew, C. 2018. 4. The Art of War and the Arthashastra: How China and India Took an Early Lead over Greece and Rome. *The Secret World: A History of Intelligence*. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 54-69.

<sup>5</sup> Ploumis, M., 2022. Comprehending and Countering Hybrid Warfare Strategies by Utilizing the Principles of Sun Tzu. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 24(2), pp.345

<sup>6</sup> Tzu, S. 2007. The art of war. Chichester, England: Capstone Publishing. P26

<sup>7</sup> Bao, B.L., 2021. Global Perspectives on Smart-Power Strategy in International Arena: Critical Discovery into Philosophy of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu from Strategic Implications. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies*, 3(9), pp.09-22

<sup>8</sup> Rogell, E., 2010. The Art of War for Dating: Master Sun Tzu's Tactics to Win Over Women. Simon and Schuster. P.17

and diplomatic efforts are critical in meeting objectives without resorting to an armed confrontation.

In modern warfare, this aspect is based on building alliances, leveraging economic and political means, and influencing international opinion. Cyberspace has also paved virtual battlegrounds where conflicts are won through non-kinetic means in sophisticated cyber operations. This is achieved through disorienting adversary capabilities and influencing the information landscape. Putting economic and financial pressure on unfriendly states is another modern-day method. This pressure is applied through trade policies, sanctions, and economic alliances aimed at influencing the behavior of the enemy states or entities without a direct military confrontation. Strategic alliances and coalitions are also a modern equivalent of winning without fighting. This creates a powerful force strong enough to achieve common objectives while at the same time deterring adversaries.

Nations also participate in humanitarian and peacekeeping operations to stabilize certain volatile regions and maintain peace, thus upholding a status quo advantageous to them without direct combat. Moreover, addressing root causes and mediating disputes through conflict resolution and proactive diplomatic efforts prevent the escalation to full-scale war. The consequences of an armed conflict in an interconnected world can be catastrophic, hence the need to venture into other non-kinetic means of winning without fighting.

### **Terrain and Environmental Awareness**

Another critical principle is that of terrain and environment awareness. This principle underscores the knowledge of geography and weather that impact military maneuvers through

access to information on physical and environmental conditions.<sup>9</sup> This concept is essential in modern warfare, incorporating satellite imagery, advanced reconnaissance technologies, and drones.<sup>10</sup> The physical characteristics of the terrain can jeopardize the efficiency of military advancements and terrain awareness helps the decisions on operational planning, defensive/offensive positioning and troop maneuvers.

Another new exploration of the principle is electronic warfare involving the manipulation of the electromagnetic spectrum. Electronic spectrum awareness facilitates communication, signal jamming, and countering enemy electronic potentials.

As recognized by Sun Tzu, climatic and weather conditions influence military operations as they affect the mobility of troops and supplies, visibility, and overall performance of the combat instruments. Weather patterns and climate change implications must be considered in contemporary forces planning. This concept crosses from the physical landscape to human understanding; hence, there is a need to be aware of the political, social, and cultural factors influencing adversary and friendly populations. A critical consideration in modern warfare is the terrain to be used in the supply chain and logistics, pivoted on an understanding of supply depots, transportation routes, and logistical challenges.

## **Unity of Command**

Another critical concept that applies to modern warfare is the principle of unity of command. Tzu emphasizes the importance of a clear and unified command structure for every military operation. As articulated in “The Art of War,” the principle remains a fundamental

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<sup>9</sup> Tzu, S. 2007. *The art of war*. Chichester, England: Capstone Publishing.p.46

<sup>10</sup> McNeilly, M., 2003. *Sun Tzu and the art of modern warfare*. Oxford University Press, USA. P.7

concept in the global military strategy. According to the concept's definition (having a single, centralized authority or commander overseeing a military operation), unity of command is essential because it ensures a coherent and coordinated effort. This minimizes confusion and enhances military efficiency.

In most military operations, there is confusion, primarily due to competing or conflicting orders. Without the unity of command, there will likely be a communication breakdown and slow decision-making processes. As a result, there are high risks of misunderstanding on battlefields. Where the principle is present, there is coordination of effort military strategies because unity of command enhances the coordination of various military elements. In addition to that the military is comprised of different branches: the army, the air force, and the navy, each with their own command structure. Each branch can work synchronized if there is a single command because there will be low chances of contradicting orders from different branch heads. In a nutshell, centralized command is paramount as it enhances the overall effectiveness of the military.

Additionally, unity of command leads to a single focus in military operations. A military commander provides a strategic direction that each military officer adheres to. This aligns all the forces with a common objective, thus preventing contradictory strategies that could otherwise compromise the military operation. A military operation with one command center also enjoys great flexibility and adaptability. The commander of such an operation makes real-time decisions, tailoring strategies based on the prevailing circumstances, without the delays and complications that come with multiple decision-makers.

In modern warfare, the principle of unity of command applies not only in conventional military settings but also in joint operations that involve diverse military branches and coalition forces. It ensures a strategic focus, clear communication, decisive leadership, and a clear chain of command. In summary, this concept helps in the establishment of a cohesive and coordinated effort is vital for success on the complex and dynamic battlefield.

### **The Principle of Leadership and Morale**

As far as combat performance is concerned, morale, persistence, and endurance can largely be attributed to two essential principles — leadership and morale. As Sun Tzu puts it in “The Art of War,” “The General who advances without the desire for fame and retires without the fear of shame, whose sole thought is to protect his country and to serve his sovereign well is truly a pearl of the state.”<sup>11</sup> It implies that the leader should be concerned with his force well-being and the mission before him. In other words, self-glorification and fear of shame do not fit here. The modern leader must lead from the front, showing exemplary commitment, adaptability, flexibility, courage, and awareness of the force's capability.

In addition, a modern military leader should be adaptable and flexible to the strategies laid; as Sun Tzu puts it, "Water shapes its course according to the nature of the ground over which it flows; the leader works out his victory about the foe whom he is facing."<sup>12</sup> Changing a strategy on the battlefield requires a leader with clear communication but with strategic deception unfathomable to the adversary though understandable to the force. Not only should the leader be communicative, but also instill motivation and morale as he communicates. Sun Tzu states, "Regard your soldiers as your children, and they will follow you into deepest valleys; look

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<sup>11</sup> Tzu, S. 2007. The art of war. Chichester, England: Capstone Publishing. P.20

<sup>12</sup> Tzu, S. 2007. The art of war. Chichester, England: Capstone Publishing.p.23

on them as your beloved sons, and they will stand by you even unto death.”<sup>13</sup> This is achievable by building strong personal connections with the team and informing the forces, which fosters loyalty and high morale.

### **Opportunities in Chaos**

The principle of opportunities in chaos from Sun Tzu’s “The Art of War” is about the chance to gain tactical advantage for any military force that can successfully navigate and exhaustively utilize it at the expense of the opponent. In any military operation, chaotic situations emerge often due to the creation of confusion on either side of the conflicting groups. Tzu advises taking advantage of such chances to gain tactical ground. He emphasizes launching surprise attacks, targeting critical leadership at the vulnerable moment of the opponent. The confusion created manipulates the perception of events on the opponent's side, making them develop faults in their planning and accelerating the existing chaos. The military can utilize deception, feigned weakness, or the spread of misinformation, all of which trigger chaos.

In addition, chaos triggered by the opponents provides a disguise for tactical maneuvering. These opportunities enable the execution of unannounced movements, trapping the opponent in chaos by disrupting their plans. The unannounced movements bring are also a for of psychological warfare due to their ability to induce fear, uncertainty, and demoralization as the opponent figures where chaos would be centered in their lines of defense. This path can lead to a victory without necessarily engaging in full-blown military operations.

Although chaos may provide a means for disguised movements, the focus should remain on the critical evaluation of the opportunity to take advantage of the chaos in the opponent’s

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<sup>13</sup> Tzu, S. 2007. The art of war. Chichester, England: Capstone Publishing. P.21

defenses. The principle of opportunities in chaos brings out the importance of strategic thinking, the ability to discern advantageous moments, and adaptability in the depth of chaos. Military leaders and planners should visualize chaos as an opportunity not something to be afraid of.

### **Winning Hearts and Minds**

The principle of winning hearts and minds may seem paradoxical in warfare. However, this paves the way for winning without fighting. Sun Tzu upheld the importance of joint civilian and military support, which he explained would contribute to long-term stability and success without direct combat. In modern warfare, this principle involves addressing the needs and concerns of the civilian population in moments of chaos.<sup>14</sup>

Building alliances and cooperation with civilians' community influencers, local leaders, religious leaders, and political leaders establishes partnerships that contribute to a more stable and supportive environment for any military operation. The alliances are made after understanding the culture, the concerns, and values of the population in order to align the military strategies to its needs. The military strategies are tailored to ensure that the local population's religious beliefs, traditions, and cultural values are not eroded by its strategies, which would foster hostility and resistance.

Moreover, winning the minds and hearts of the local population would mean avoiding unnecessary hostility. The military strategies should not bring harm to civilians or disrupt their day-to-day activities. This is demonstrated by respect for the local population's beliefs, cultural practices, religious beliefs, or other daily activities. The respect is pivoted on strategic

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<sup>14</sup> Eisenhower, D.D., 2020. Psychological Science and the Art of War. *Head Strong: How Psychology is Revolutionizing War*, p.1

communication, which pertains not only to conveying the military goals but also to listening and addressing the concerns of the civilian community. Communication should be clear and transparent to foster understanding and trust.

The existence of a conflict brings along with it a need for humanitarian assistance. This demonstrates a commitment to the interests of the population. Military forces offer aid and assistance to communities caught in the line of conflict, which may include medical check-ups, free training, provision of formal education in schools, and improvement of infrastructure, among other things. This contributes to the objective of winning the hearts and minds of the local population. Humanitarian assistance should not only be for the moment of war but also as a long-term vision.<sup>15</sup> The military forces should not focus on immediate gains but on creating long-lasting stability. This would help increase the goodwill of the community which could be of immense assistance during times of combat.

The principles espoused by Sun Tzu are still applicable in terms of leadership, morale, and command structures. In current military scenarios, good leadership includes making decisions from the bottom level of the organization or unit, team building, and keeping the morale high, just like Sun Ze taught about superior leadership excellence practice. Moreover, beyond warfare, the philosophies of Sun Tzu have been reworked into various business and management techniques. Likewise, competitive intelligence, strategic positioning, and predicting market movements are comparable to Sun Tzu's strategic vision.

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<sup>15</sup> Wade, D., 2006. *Golf and the Art of War: How the Timeless Strategies of Sun-Tzu Can Transform Your Game*. Da Capo Press.P.21

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Sun Tzu's principles espoused in the ‘The Art of War’ reveal an exceptional connection and adaptability of ancient wisdom to contemporary military difficulties. The success of modern military strategies is hinged on the application of the principles of economic consideration, adaptability, and flexibility, intelligence and surveillance, deception and misdirection, strategic planning, and timing, winning without fighting, terrain and environment awareness, unity of command, leadership and morale, opportunities and chaos, and winning hearts and minds. Incorporating these principles into the current military strategies involves appreciating the evolving nature of conflict, the interconnectedness of global affairs, and technological advancement. Moreover, the continued relevance of these principles lies in their adaptability to the dynamic nature of warfare. Military leaders and strategists can efficiently navigate the sophistications of contemporary conflicts by integrating this immense wisdom with modern technologies and methodologies for effective yet ethical results.

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