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The Art of War by Sun Tzu: Relevancy in Modern Warfare

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Abstract

One of the oldest military strategy books in the world, Sun Tzu's Art of War is a well-known classic from the warring states era that has been in print for more than 2,500 years. It is still studied and used extensively in military strategy, politics, entrepreneurship, and investing among other areas. The article's goal was to assess Art of War's relevancy in modern warfare. The study examined the tenets of Art of War, its application in the 20th century, and its applicability in the present. Discussed three wars of the twenty-first century-the war in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021, the war in Iraq from 2003 to 2011, and the current war between Russia and Ukraine. They concluded that the Art of War is still relevant today, just as it was twenty-five centuries ago, because whenever political and military leaders followed the Art of War, they have won, and whenever they disregarded the key works of the Art of War, they have lost. This study employs qualitative analysis of secondary data, including historical records, military reports, and scholarly articles.

Keywords

Alliance, Art of War, Information/Intelligence, Know the Enemy, Modern Warfare, Subdue the Enemy, Sun Tzu

Introduction

“Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, a well-known Chinese classic from the Warring States era that has been in print for more than 2,500 years, is regarded as one of the oldest and most read military strategy books in the world” (DAI, 2023). Despite its ancient origins, *Art of War* remains highly relevant today. “The *Art of War* has been widely studied and applied in many fields, such as military strategy, politics, investing, entrepreneurship and personal development. Despite being written in ancient Chinese, *Art of War's* content is straightforward and un-mysterious” (DAI, 2023).

“The *Art of War*, Sun Tzu's foundational work on the evolution of strategic thinking, had a profound and enduring impact on military strategy worldwide. Everyone has adhered to its principles, from Cold War nuclear planners to modern Chinese cyber warriors” (Wilson, 2022).

Even today, political, military, and corporate leaders read, teach, and apply the principles, tactics, and strategies outlined in the timeless Sun Tzu's *Art of War* (hereby *Art of War*). This article explores the core concepts of *Art of War* as presented in its English translation, assessing their application in both historical and contemporary warfare. The use of *Art of War* by political and military leaders in the past (20th century), with an emphasis on important topics and events, will then be examined in this paper. Before concluding the research will discuss the applicability of *Art of War* to warfare in the twenty-first century, referencing the, the Afghanistan War of 2001-2021, the Iraq War 2003-2011, and ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine.

Review of Literature

Lionel Gilles' translation of *Art of War* highlights the timeless applicability of Sun Tzu's principles, while modern scholars like Ota (2014) have connected these principles to contemporary military strategies. Still more issues can be examined to

understand the prevailing context via Sun Tzu's perspective. As a result, this article will attempt to condense the ideas, historical employment, and contemporary use of *Art of War* into a single paper.

Methodology

Secondary empirical data from academic literature, historical records, journal articles, and military reports were analyzed. As is common in most social-science research, the method used to answer the research question “The Art of War by Sun Tzu: Relevancy in Modern Warfare,” will be a qualitative analysis utilizing qualitative data. More specifically, the article will employ secondary empirical data from academic literature, including books, journal articles, theses, and newspaper stories.

The Premises of Art of War by Sun Tzu

“*Sun Tzu’s Work: The Art of War*”, a treatise on military strategy (also known as *The Thirteen Chapters*), has the broad classification as:

- **Strategic Planning:** “Laying of Plans,” “Waging of War,” “Attack by Stratagem”
- **Tactical Execution:** “Energy,” “Weak and Strong Points,” “Maneuver”
- **Intelligence and Information:** “Using Spies,” “Variations in Tactics”

The detail breakdown of the chapters are as mentioned below based on the book by Lionel Gilles: I, Laying of plans (critical calculations made for war); II, Waging of war (costs and danger of mobilizing the country for war); III Attack by stratagem; IV Tactical dispositions; V Energy (advantage of momentum of war); VI Weak and strong points; VII, Maneuver; VIII Variations in tactics (nine variables); IX Army on the move (lineup); X Terrain; XI Nine types of ground; XII Attack with fire; XIII Using spies for information.

The important lines of the book “*Sun Tzu’s Art of War*” by Giles (1994), based on author’s understanding is mentioned below:

“War being a serious and vital importance to the state”, therefore you should think carefully before engaging in any war;” Sun Tzu’s explanation on the art of war being governed by five constant factors, that has to be taken into account in one’s deliberations, when seeking to determine the condition in the field (The morale Law; Heaven; Earth; The Commander; Method; and Discipline), which, he goes on to explain in great details and inscribes that the above five heads should be familiar to every general (commander): and, “the general who knows them will be victorious; he who knows them not will fail.”; Winning a hundred victories in a hundred battles in not the best possible outcome, best is to subdue the enemy without fighting.”; “you should try to take the enemy’s country intact”, how? “that is by breaking his will to fight”; and a significant line: “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle”; and “importance of intelligence/information (spies) for launching operations against the enemy”, the requirement of establishing an alliance before launching any war; and, “the behavior and leadership qualities of ruler, prince and the general”.

Despite being written over 2500 years ago, *Art of War* remains relevant reading for modern army officers, senior military leaders, and political and business leaders, in general. It addresses all three levels of operations—tactical, operational, and strategic. All that is needed is to apply *Art of War* to the current state of warfare and situation. Sun Tzu's well-known statement, “The *Art of War* is of vital importance to the State,” continues to teach us a great deal about war, including strategy, tactics, enemy, ground,

deception, leadership, logistics, etc. “Some of the most famous people in politics, economics, sports, and entertainment all quote from Sun Tzu's more than 2,500-year-old methods for acquiring a competitive edge since they are so widely used and ageless” (Wilson, 2022).

Sun Tzu’s *Art of War* in Past Practices (20th century)

As Ota (2014) writes, “Sun Tzu was initially found in Europe in the late 1700s. It is said that German Emperor Wilhelm II said, I wish I could have read Sun Tzu before World War I.” The question of whether World War I would have occurred if he had read the book will never be resolved, although it seems unlikely that it would never have occurred, because the emperor was so taken by Sun Tzu's work. “General Douglas MacArthur once said that he kept *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu on his desk at all times” (The Art of War, 2018). His study of the *Art of War* can be related to his famous landing at Incheon to retake Seoul in September 1950, after the North Korean Army had pushed US-led UN forces and the South Korean forces to Busan in the southern part of present day South Korea.

Although Mao has not addressed incorporating Sun Tzu's ideas into his plans and methods, several of the Red Army slogan verses listed below are similar to those of Sun Tzu, As per Boorman& Boorman (1964):

“The enemy advances, we retreat; “The enemy camps, we harass...”; “When the enemy comes forward, we flee...”; "When you are close, make it seem like you are far away; when you are far away, make it seem like you are close...”; and “A guerrilla commander needs to realize that the most crucial way to alter the situation is to employ his forces in a flexible manner....”

Corneli (1987), wrote, “how the Soviet Union used *Sun Tzu's Art of War*, he also discusses, ‘Richard Nixon's 1980 book ‘The Real War’, in which Nixon quotes Sun Tzu

three times in relation to the ‘prolonged war in Vietnam,’ ‘on nuclear strategy against the Soviet Union,’ and ‘how to defeat the Soviet forces’.”

James Clavell, the renowned best-selling author of *King Rat*, *Tai Pan*, *Shōgun*, and *Noble House*, among other works, wrote a foreword for the exquisite version of *The Art of War* that was published by New York's cc Delacorte Press at the beginning of 1983. The foreword by Claveil is breathtaking, as per Robert (2022):

“I firmly believe that if our current military and political leaders had studied this brilliant work, Vietnam would not have happened as it did; we would not have lost the Korean War (we lost because we failed to win); the Bay of Pigs; the Iranian hostage crisis; the British Empire would not have been destroyed; and, most likely, World Wars I and II would not have been fought as they were, and the millions of young people who were obliterated needlessly and foolishly by monsters posing as generals would still be alive today. Claveil continues, saying: I think it's amazing that Sun Tzu articulated so many facts 25 centuries ago that still hold true today. He quotes Sun Tzu's core principle at this point: Supreme brilliance consists in destroying the enemy's resistance without fighting.”

From the aforementioned readings, it is evident how influential *Art of War* was for political and military leaders in the 20th century. A writer like Claveli would not have praised Sun Tzu if it was not for his everlasting words written so long ago, and inscribed many of the wars would not have happened, or happened the way they happened, as this is very much related to the very important lines mentioned in the *Art of war*, “war being a serious and vital importance to the state, therefore you should think carefully before engaging in any war...”; and “subduing the enemy without fighting...”, “if you know the enemy...”. “Other notable military and political figures who cited the book as an inspiration also include Norman Schwarzkopf Jr., Vietnamese general VõNguyễnGiáp, and Japanese daimyō Takeda Shingen (*The Art of War*, 2018).

Sun Tzu's Art of War's Relevance in Modern Warfare

Let's now examine how the key principles of *Art of War*-such as 'subdue the enemy without fighting' and 'if you know the enemy'-apply to three significant 21st-century conflicts, i.e., the Afghanistan War against terror of 2001-2021, the Iraq War of 2003-2011, and the Russian-Ukrainian War 2014 and 2022 onwards. Let us visualize the above mentioned three wars, with these important lines from Sun Tzu's Art of War: "subdue the enemy without fighting...", "if you know the enemy...", "information/intelligence leading to the correct employment of spies...", and "alliances for support of war effort...".

Afghanistan War

In the Afghanistan War (2001-2021), the U.S. initially succeeded in toppling the Taliban quickly using air power and small forces. This aligns with Sun Tzu's principle of 'subduing the enemy without fighting.' However, the failure in later phases can be attributed to a lack of understanding of the enemy and ineffective intelligence, leading to the Taliban's resurgence. "According to the Costs of War Project, since the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001, 243,000 people have died directly as a result of the war, including 70,000 civilians and 2324 US military personnel, costing the country \$2.313 trillion" (The US War in Afghanistan, 1999-2021).

The phases of war as per Witte (2001-2014):

"The first phase—toppling the Taliban (the ultraconservative political and religious faction that ruled Afghanistan and provided sanctuary for al-Qaeda, perpetrators of the September 11 attacks)—was brief, lasting just two months. The second phase, from 2002 until 2008, was marked by a U.S. strategy of defeating the Taliban militarily and rebuilding core institutions of the Afghan state. The third phase, a turn to classic counterinsurgency doctrine, began

in 2008 and accelerated with U.S. Pres. Barack Obama's 2009 decision to temporarily increase the U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan.”

The second and later the third phases of operations could not be successful as the United States was unable to pursue the Taliban and al Qaeda into Pakistan and Hamid Karzai led Afghan administration that the US installed, was ineffective at winning over the people. The Afghan government was unable to maintain authority over all regions, creating a void that the Taliban would fill after their return. The lack of planning and preparation allowed the reemergence of the Taliban allowing it to regroup and reconquer Afghanistan.

Now, using Sun Tzu's four key points mentioned above as a foundation, let's examine the war in Afghanistan through the prism of his *Art of War*. It can be agreed that by using small, swift forces and overwhelming air power, the United States defeated the adversary in the first phase, it was in Sun Tzu's ideas of the *Art of War*, particularly “subdue the enemy without fighting...” and “if you know the enemy...”

The failure of US and Allied forces in Afghanistan during the second and third phases were due to unclear objectives and a lack of enemy knowledge. The Afghan government's incompetence, which allowed the Taliban to reappear in Afghanistan, made this situation much worse. The second and third phases failed because of “information/intelligence...” and “if you know the enemy...,” which refers to not having the required information on Taliban's preparations and reorganizations following their initial setback and not understanding the Afghan people and their needs.

In terms of alliances, it was successful because the United States had NATO and the backing of 25 countries in the war against the Taliban and al Qaeda, but this was insufficient on its own. Afghan war can be summed up saying, "winning battles and achieving small goals but failing to capitalize on these accomplishments is ominous and may be described as wasteful delay.”

Iraq War 2003

As per Iraq War (2003-2011):

“Iraq War, (2003–11), or conflict in Iraq consisted of two phases. The first of these was a brief, conventionally fought war in March–April 2003, in which a combined force of troops from the United States and Great Britain (with smaller contingents from several other countries) invaded Iraq and rapidly defeated Iraqi military and paramilitary forces. It was followed by a longer second phase in which a U.S.-led occupation of Iraq was opposed by an insurgency.”

“The *last* American soldiers leave Iraq after nearly nine years of deployment. Nearly 4,500 Americans and well over 100,000 Iraqis lost their lives in the conflict, which the U.S. Department of the Treasury estimates cost \$800 billion” (The US War in Afghanistan, 2003-2011).

Regarding the initial onslaught, it can be agreed that it was quick and fierce and in less than a month, the United States won the war in Iraq, and it undoubtedly followed *Art of War's* important lines “subduing the enemy ...” and “if you know the enemy”. After that, the US soldiers were stalled for eight years, from 2003 to 2011, and they were only able to remove Saddam Hussain.

The initial invasion of Iraq was swift, consistent with the principle of 'subduing the enemy without fighting.' However, the prolonged insurgency highlights a failure to 'know the enemy' and the lack of a strategic understanding of local dynamics, as Sun Tzu emphasized.

Through the lens of *Art of War*, it can be concluded that the US forces' operations could not be based on “if you know the enemy...,” and “information/intelligence...” as Sun Tzu made clear in his book, as they were stuck in the insurgency for eight long years, which demonstrates a lack of knowledge and understanding of the Iraqi people as

well as a failure to identify the true enemy. They were also unable to expand the “alliance...,” demonstrating that the US was unable to persuade its friends and even its military partner, NATO, to support their objective in Iraq.

Russia-Ukraine War

Let us now discuss the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war which started in 2014 with the capture of Crimea peninsula without any bloodshed. The present full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine started on 24th Feb 2022. Sanders (2023) says, “Due to Ukraine's adoption of a modified western transformation model of military reform, which emphasizes ... bringing its forces up to NATO standards, the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) had gained a great deal of flexibility and adaptability, enabling them to take the initiative even in the face of a militarily superior force.” “Russia had planned to take over Ukraine in 10 days and annex it by August that year (2022)” (Captured Russian documents, 2024). As per Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky “43,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been killed and 370,000 injuries have been reported. He also claimed that 198,000 Russian soldiers have been killed and 550,000 wounded (not verified)” (Binley &Belae, 2024). “Ukrainian forces advanced up to 30 kilometers into Russian territory as a result of Ukrainian counteroffensives, which were too strong for Kursk's defensive lines capturing 1,000 km of Russia’s land” (Kumar, 2024).

Now, using *Art of War* and the four key lines previously discussed, let's examine the current state of the Russia-Ukraine war based on the paragraph above, that provides us with a general overview of the conflict. A prime example of “subduing the enemy without fighting” was the first phase, which involved the acquisition and annexation of Crimea in 2014, without further resistance from either the Ukrainian government or Crimea itself. “Russia used targeted media operations to attack the Ukrainian government, people, and international community, achieving a strategic victory on the Crimean Peninsula” (Sweitzer, 2018).

Russia's early ground offensive plan in 2022 primarily relied on psychological intimidation and overwhelming strength to force Ukraine into submission, as was the case in Crimea. However, this strategy failed to understand the long-term resilience of Ukrainian forces and the modified Western transformation model of military reform, which is why, “Russia presently controls over 18 percent of Ukrainian land (111,677 square kilometers), including Crimea and portions of the eastern Ukraine's Donbas region, which the Kremlin has controlled since 2014” (Melkozerova, 2024). And, failed to stop Ukraine from capturing 1,000 km of its land in Kursk. Therefore, we can say that Russia was unable to comply with the Ukrainian Army's standard and plan, i.e., “if you know the enemy...,” and failed to obtain “information/intelligence...”. With the exception of North Korea, which recently dispatched forces to fight alongside the Russian Army, there is no “alliance”, therefore, a failure on the “alliance...” too.

The article used Sun Tzu's famous lines from his *Art of War* – “subduing the enemy...,” “if you know the enemy...,” “information/intelligence...,” and “alliance” - to evaluate three wars of the twenty-first century: The Afghanistan War (2001-2021); The Iraq War (2003-2011); and Ongoing Russia-Ukraine War. What can be inferred from the aforementioned is the applicability of Sun Tzu’s *Art of War* in modern warfare. As demonstrated by the abovementioned examples, war has been successful when the key principles of the *Art of War* have been adhered to, and war has failed when they have been disregarded or overlooked. This demonstrates the applicability of *Sun Tzu's Art of War* in modern warfare.

The relevancy of *Art of War* in the present day is further elaborated by what Scholar and diplomat Xiaoming L. A. (2012) who has this to say this about China’s military strategy and its relation with the *Art of War*:

“The *Art of War* essentially discusses preventing conflict and entering it cautiously. However, this cautious approach does not imply weakness or fear.

Understanding our military strategy is vital for world leaders. The tenets of *The Art of War* should never be interpreted as an indication of fragility or weakness. Preemptive strikes are not to be launched by China. However, there should be no question that China will respond forcefully to defend its interests if we are threatened or attacked. The main idea of China's military strategy is quite obvious. China has the intelligence and deterrent to prevail without resorting to violence. However, China is capable and brave enough to prevail in combat if necessary. This is the core of China's current military strategy and the *Art of War*.”

Conclusion

The various chapters discussed the premises of Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, *Art of War* in past practices (20th century), and its relevance in the modern warfare. Sun Tzu's principles, tactics, and strategies continue to influence military, political, and corporate leaders today and will remain relevant in the future. In the premises of *Art of War*, a few important lines as per the understanding of the author of the article on the book Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, translated by Lionel Giles was presented, but that does not mean those are the only important lines. It is for the reader to comprehend the book and employ what is written on it as per their understanding.

Political and military leaders in the 20th century used *Art of War*, as evidenced by past practices. Some have stated that they used it, while others have not, despite their writings suggesting otherwise. Still others have claimed that they obtained the book later and thus were unable to apply its lessons to prevent wars.

On the last chapter, i.e. the relevance in modern warfare, the paper discussed three wars of the 21st century through the prism of *Sun Tzu's Art of War* in brief, based on 4 important lines “subdue the enemy without fighting...”, “if you know the

enemy...”, “information/intelligence leading to the correct employment of spies...”, and “alliances supporting the war effort...” as per the author’s understanding of *Art of War* and warfare. The aforementioned instances show that when the fundamental rules of *Art of War* have been adhered to, war has been successful; when they have been ignored or overlooked, the war has failed for that state. This illustrates the relevance of *Art of War* in modern warfare. The adherence of *Art of War* in China’s military strategy shows *Art of War*’s relevance and importance today and in the future. In conclusion, the relevance of *Art of War* is evident across various domains of modern warfare. It is crucial that institutions, such as the Nepal Army, integrate Sun Tzu's timeless lessons into their training programs.

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