

Analysis of Sun Tzu's Art of War

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Spring 2024 Public Policy Conference

Liberty University

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The Art of War was written approximately 2,400 years ago by the famous Sun Tzu, a military scientist and one of the most able commanders of ancient China. His book contains timeless advice on how to assess a situation before going into war, how to wage war, and how to win a battle without even fighting. Sun Tzu focuses on strategy above all else and explains how a war is not merely won by brute strength. A more powerful enemy can be defeated by a weaker state through strategy and deception. As Sun Tzu says in his book, "All warfare is based on deception." He also has a broader view of war than just the military. He also considers economics, politics, and diplomacy. All are important factors of war. Sun Tzu's *Art of War* is useful for the U.S. to understand and engage foreign adversaries.

The main point of Sun Tzu's *Art of War* is that a state should attempt to defeat an enemy by wisdom, not by force alone. Deception, superior intelligence, and exploitation of weaknesses can make victory possible even if the opponent is numerically larger or owns superior weaponry. A state can outmaneuver and outsmart a larger enemy. A modern way of expressing the basic principle of Sun Tzu is to refer to the old saying "mind over matter." What one lacks in size or strength can be made up for in strategy and deception. Regarding deception Sun Tzu says, "Therefore, when capable of attacking, feign incapacity; when active in moving troops, feign inactivity. When near the enemy, make it seem that you are far away; when far away, make it seem that you are near." One must be patient and bide their time when preparing to strike an enemy. Deception takes time and is only the first step in winning a fight. It sets the stage for the rest of the battle. Deception is about creating an opportunity by fooling and confusing the enemy so that he is vulnerable and then striking that vulnerability.

Superior intelligence in battle is of supreme importance. Sun Tzu does not elaborate very much on military intelligence, but he does include it in his chapter "Use of Spies." He concludes his chapter by saying, "Spy operations are essential in war; upon them the army relies to make its every move." A modern-day analogy would be the image of the proverbial spear in military operations. Operators, such as Special Forces soldiers, are referred to as the "tip of the spear" because they are the ones who carry out the mission and get put in harm's way. However, it is the rod behind the spear, or military intelligence, that makes those missions possible. The intelligence community provides the operators with all the information they need to complete the mission. In a way, they are responsible for the safety of the operators because the better the intelligence the less risk the soldiers face. The article "The Value of Military Intelligence" says, "More intelligence and higher efficiency of the intelligence gathering and assessment process may reduce the level of uncertainty in assessing the tactical and strategic capabilities and intentions of the rival."¹ A reduced level of uncertainty means greater advantage and less risk for U.S. forces on the battlefield.

Exploitation of weaknesses is the most fundamental principle in Sun Tzu's *Art of War*. Deception and superior intelligence gathering only set the stage for the state to take advantage of the weakness it has found and the opportunity it has created. In this regard, Sun Tzu says, "Strike the enemy when he is in disorder" and "Attack the enemy where he is unprepared, and appear where you are not expected." The element of surprise is critical in battle. A stronger enemy can be defeated by a weaker state if the latter has knowledge (or intelligence) of the stronger enemy's

¹ Pecht, E. & Tishler, A. (2015) The value of military intelligence. *Defence and Peace Economics*, 26:2, 179-211, DOI: 10.1080/10242694.2014.886435.

weakness, how to exploit it, and the element of surprise (or deception).

A good example of the combination of all three of these elements is the Battle of the Feishui River, an ancient Chinese battle dating back to 383 B.C. The Jin army, which only numbered eighty thousand, was up against the Qin army, which numbered more than three hundred thousand. One of the Jin generals realized he was going to have to use wisdom, not mere force, to beat the Qin army. He identified a weakness in the Qin army, which was its command was not unified. He deceived the Qin army by asking it to retreat so that the Jin army could cross the Feishui River to fight Qin. Due to its weak command, there was some confusion as the Qin army retreated. It was made worse when a Jin officer who had surrendered to the Qin army seized the opportunity to create disorder and shouted, "The Qin army is defeated!" The army was thrown into great confusion and that is when the Jin army attacked. The Jin army won, proving the effectiveness of deception, intelligence, and exploitation of weakness in battle.

Sun Tzu's principles of war can be applied to contemporary national security threats such as, ironically, China. The birthplace of Sun Tzu has mastered his principles and is currently using them to try and defeat the U.S. They desire to replace the U.S. as the global superpower and because the U.S. has been blind to their plan for so long, it is losing. Michael Pillsbury, an expert on China, discloses China's plans and intentions in his book *The Hundred-Year Marathon*. It is so named because China's plan to be the new global hegemon began in 1949 and they plan to achieve their objective by 2049, exactly one hundred years since their scheme began. They deeply understand the art of deception, the importance of intelligence, and the exploitation of weaknesses. Not only do they understand it, but they have been putting these principles into practice for years.

One of the lies that China has deceived the U.S. with is that it is a "fragile flower" in need of U.S. assistance. It falsely assures the U.S. that it has no intention of overthrowing them, desiring to lull the U.S. into complacency. On its own, China would never have the capability to challenge the U.S. so it duped the U.S. into giving them what they needed to build themselves up. Such a strategy is also like one of Sun Tzu's principles which says, "A wise general sees to it that his troops feed on the enemy, for one *zhong* of the enemy's provisions is equivalent to twenty of one's own and one *shi* of the enemy's fodder to twenty *shi* of one's own." To use one's own resources, he argues, will quickly wear out the country. It is more advantageous to feed off the enemies' resources. That is exactly what China has done. Through falsely assuring the U.S. that they are on a path to democracy, that they only want better cooperation, and that they are no threat, China has acquired great military, scientific, and technological capabilities. The joke, it seems, is very much on the U.S.

In matters of superior intelligence, China is also an expert. What they have not been able to deceive the U.S. into giving them, they have stolen. Using cyber hacks, information-gathering apps such as Tik Tok, and even the use of human spies, China has gathered an immense amount of intelligence on the U.S. Their espionage activities surpass that of any other country, even Russia. One of the primary ways China spys on the U.S. is by sending students to study at U.S. universities. These students learn all the U.S. tactics, strategies, and ways of thinking and then return to China with knowledge of how the U.S. operates. The article "Survey of Chinese Espionage in the United States Since 2000" says, "Chinese nationals who come to the US to work or study are a fertile ground for recruitment. Often they intend to return to China or have

close family members resident in China, making them more susceptible to coercion.”² China leverages the U.S. open society for intelligence collection.

Exploitation of weakness is yet another aspect of strategy that China understands and intends to employ. The U.S. is stronger than China economically, militarily, and technologically. Using conventional means, China will never be able to defeat the U.S. Once again, China appeals to Sun Tzu’s principle of “Attack the enemy where he is unprepared, and appear where you are not expected.” This saying is epitomized in a Chinese concept called *shashoujian*, which roughly translated means Assassin’s Mace. In ancient Chinese folklore, there is a story of a hero confronted by a seemingly undefeatable adversary. He was stronger, more powerful, armed with the most expensive and technologically advanced weapons of the day, and feared by everyone. However, the hero was unafraid because he had a secret and peculiar weapon which he had trained for years to use. With this unusual weapon, the element of surprise, and knowledge of his enemy’s weakest point, the hero won over his seemingly undefeatable opponent. The Assassin’s Mace is a trump card in the face of seemingly undefeatable odds. China desires to use all three major factors in the story to defeat the U.S. The primary way the Assassin’s Mace is applied is through the military. China is actively developing asymmetrical weapons in secret, aimed at striking U.S. weak points to compensate for their lack of overall military power. There are three primary areas they are focusing on: technology, space, and naval power.

One U.S. weakness is their dependence on technology. China plans to exploit U.S. technological vulnerability by creating weapons that take down the systems the U.S. needs. *The Hundred Year Marathon* lists several of these weapons which include “assaulting radar and radio stations with smart weapons; jamming enemy communications facilities via electronic warfare; attacking communication centers, facilities, and command ships; destroying electronic systems with electromagnetic pulse weapons; wiping out computer software with computer viruses; and developing directed-energy weapons.”³ Another large component is the use of electromagnetic pulse weapons which could wipe out all electronics within a wide range by replicating the electromagnetic pulses of a nuclear explosion. Without the advantage of technology, the U.S. would be reduced back to the capabilities of World War II. The problem is no one knows how to operate in a World War II environment. There would be no communicating by cell phone, no access to computers, no command-and-control mechanisms for fighters or smart bombs. Ironically, the technological advancement of the U.S. that makes it so powerful and gives it such an advantage over other nations is also the same thing that makes it so vulnerable. People, including the military, do not know how operate without it. Therefore, the loss of technology would render the U.S. military blind and almost useless, which is exactly what China wants. The U.S. Department of Defense document *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* says, “PLA EW units routinely train to conduct jamming and anti-jamming operations against multiple communication and radar systems and Global Positioning

² Center for Strategic & International Studies. (2014, May). *Survey of Chinese Espionage in the United States Since 2000*. <https://www.csis.org/programs/strategic-technologies-program/archives/survey-chinese-espionage-united-states-2000>.

³ Pillsbury, M. (2015). *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China’s Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. Henry Holt and Company.

System (GPS) satellite systems during force-on-force exercises.”⁴ The Assassin’s Mace is not merely wishful thinking on the part of China, but a real threat.

The second main aspect China is focused on is space. It has been said that the nation to dominate space warfare is going to dominate the world. This is because of the significance of satellites and the advantages they provide. Satellites are used for intelligence gathering by photographing enemy positions and monitoring radio and phone calls. They are also used for GPS, and guiding ordnance such as unmanned drones and cruise missiles. Satellites connect military bases across a hundred million square miles and allow vital communications that would not otherwise be possible. For example, the U.S. Central Command in Tampa, Florida can communicate with troops in the Middle East and the U.S. Pacific Command can communicate with fleets and other forces across the ocean. Battle ships depend on satellites to communicate with one another. The U.S. Department of Defense document also includes the importance of space saying, “Space has been considered a distinct domain of warfare since at least 2015, and the PLA expects space to play an important role in future conflicts enabling long-range precision strikes and in denying other militaries the use of overhead command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems. The PRC will probably continue to develop the capabilities for use against satellites in orbit to degrade and deny adversary space capabilities.”⁵ For the last twenty years, China has been creating Assassin’s Mace weapons that can take down satellites. These weapons include a land-based laser that could either blind satellites or blow them up. Parasitic microsatellites are small devices that could cling to satellites and either disable it or hijack the information it gathers. Other microsatellites could be used for electronic jamming, EMP generation, or pushing the satellite out of orbit. Another asymmetrical weapon China has explored is a ground-based antisatellite missile that could be used to blow the satellite out of the sky. China has in fact already developed such missiles and has been testing them since 2007. The introduction of warfare to things such as technology and space is evidence of Sun Tzu’s principle of war being so much more than just the military.

Naval power is an important aspect of China’s Assassin’s Mace. China has overinvested in three areas as part of their blunting strategy: submarines, mines, and missiles. It built the world’s largest submarine fleet, the world’s largest storage of sea mines, and became the first country to own an anti-ship ballistic missile. All were created for anti-access/area denial, mainly against aircraft carriers. China not only focused on building the most submarines of any country, but they chose to build rather unusual ones. They built diesel submarines with air-independent propulsion (AIP) instead of nuclear ones. Diesel submarines travel shorter distances than nuclear ones, but they are quieter and cheaper to build. Therefore, they can be used for stealth such as sneaking up on an aircraft carrier and China can produce more of them. Although China could have created nuclear submarines, they chose to create a denial-focused navy that mixed diesel and nuclear submarines in contrast to the U.S. all nuclear submarine force. Additionally, China has equipped its submarines for anti-surface warfare that is only useful against the U.S. They have armed their submarines with anti-ship cruise missiles in contrast to the U.S. Navy which until recently only used torpedoes. Anti-ship cruise missiles have a greater range (4-10 times

⁴ U.S. Department of Defense. (2022). *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*. <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Nov/29/2003122279/-1/-1/1/2022-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>.

⁵ Ibid, 2.

more) and greater speed (generally supersonic). Almost every Chinese submarine built or acquired since 1994 now has one of these missiles.

Mines are another asymmetric weapon that China has poured extensive effort into. They have the capability to do devastating damage to aircraft carriers at a fraction of the cost. Mines only cost a few thousand dollars; aircraft carriers cost millions, sometimes up to a billion dollars. The cost of repairing a damaged aircraft carrier is costly too. That is why mines are such an ingenious weapon for China to wield. Learning from the use of mine warfare during the Gulf War, China invested heavily into mines. They created moored, bottom, drifting, rocket-propelled, and intelligent mines through domestic development and purchase of Russian mine technology. They also invested in deep-sea and rocket mines demonstrating their intent to use them against U.S. aircraft carriers far out to sea. Pseudo-doctrinal writings on Chinese mine warfare contain phrases that reveal the asymmetric advantage mines can give. *The Long Game* says, “These phrases include that mines are ‘easy to lay, hard to sweep,’ a reference to the asymmetric operational advantage that comes from them, and that ‘four ounces can move one thousand pounds’ which is a reference to their asymmetric destructive potential.”⁶ Another commonly quoted phrase is “not attracting attention” which means that major navies, particularly the U.S. Navy, is not focusing much on mines as a threat. China does not simply create these mines; they also practice using them. Mine-laying has been an important part of submarine training for the past two decades and a crucial part of the Qingdao Submarine Academy’s curriculum. China’s focus on asymmetric naval weapons is a prime example of their Assassin’s Mace strategy.

Political blunting is yet another important aspect of China’s blunting strategy. China fears U.S. involvement in Asia and seeks to curtail it however possible. China does this primarily by joining the leading Asian regional organizations of the time such as Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). China joined all three of these organizations in order to undermine them, constrain enemy power, and falsely reassure wary countries of their benign intentions. APEC was founded in 1989 and consists of twenty-one Pacific Rim member economies that seek to promote trade and development assistance. One of the main ways that China seeks to undermine APEC is by opposing its institutionalization. When China joined APEC, there was talk about supremacy within the organization, meaning the U.S. However, China called for equal consultation so that they could veto decisions. Additionally, China’s involvement allowed it to prevent the U.S. from having a platform that promoted economic and political norms as well as creating security or military policy that would resemble an Asian NATO. When it came to ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), China opposed their institutionalization too. In 1995, ARF proposed a blueprint for institutionalization that called for three things: confidence-building measures (CBMs), mechanisms for preventative diplomacy (PD), and conflict resolution agreements. China, afraid that this blueprint would make it easier for the U.S. to interfere in Taiwan and the South China Sea, undermined it. They refused to share information about their military; they blatantly opposed and then weakened PD mechanisms with sovereignty principles; and they redefined conflict resolution to “elaboration of approaches to conflicts” which is an almost useless definition. China’s plan to infiltrate Asian organizations that may create issues for them espouses Sun Tzu’s principles of showing up where one is not expected and acting benevolent on the

⁶ Doshi, R. (2021). *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*. Oxford University Press.

outside but being ruthless on the inside.

There are those who continue to insist that China is not a threat, but not because they necessarily believe the lies that China has told in the past. Their reason for thinking China is non-threatening is because of their failing communist system and consequent faltering economy. Communists espouse socialism which believes in the equal distribution of wealth to all members of society. While this may sound good on a superficial level, there are serious problems with a central planning authority controlling the economy. The main issue is that a controlled economy in which everyone gets the same amount of money regardless of what job they have severely decreases economic motive. The decreased economic motive then depresses creativity which then decreases economic production. People are energized by the idea of inventing new things, creating their own wealth, and then having the freedom to spend that wealth however they choose. A planned economy takes that freedom away.

Socialism controls the means for all people's ends, and decides which ends are to be satisfied or not. Such an approach necessarily locks people into predetermined jobs and societal positions in which there is no escape. There will be no room for diversity and no use for people with strong motivation and creativity. The central planning authority will set universal standards for what an employee needs to be instead of allowing for accommodation of his special talents. The book *The Road to Serfdom* expresses the problem eloquently saying, "We shall no longer be free to be rational or efficient only when and where we think it worth while; we shall all have to conform to the standards which the planning authority must fix in order to simplify its task. To make this immense task manageable, it will have to reduce the diversity of human capacities and inclinations to a few categories of readily interchangeable units and deliberately to disregard minor personal differences."⁷ A socialist economy discourages incentive, creativity, and diversity which drives production down, which in turn weakens the entire state.

However, China has sustained its socialist economy since 1949. Not only has the economy been merely sustained, but it has experienced a rapid economic growth no other country has in a short seventy-five years. Behind the U.S., China has the second largest economy in the world. According to the book *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Replace American Order* China is the first U.S. competitor to surpass 60% of US GDP and in terms of purchasing power, it is already 25% larger than the U.S. economy. China has indeed grown stronger and bolder in the last seventy-five years, not weaker and more timid. Such growth despite the weaknesses of socialism can be explained by examining the totalitarian side of socialism.

To create a socialist state, a leader does not need the support of the whole people. Rather, he simply needs a group who is willing to voluntarily support totalitarian rule and then force it upon the rest. Once the group is created, as discussed previously, all power belongs to that single group and everyone else is forced to comply. Secondly, a totalitarian regime can unite its people by brainwashing and getting them to agree on a negative program such as hatred of an enemy. *The Road to Serfdom* says, "The contrast between the 'we' and the 'they,' the common fight against those outside the group, seems to be an essential ingredient in any creed which will solidly knit together a group for common action." By controlling all sources of information and spreading propaganda, China has united its people in their fight against "America, the Great Satan." Lastly, to make up for its suppression of creativity, China has been tricking and stealing new ideas and inventions from the U.S. since its alliance in 1971. Through its strategy of deceit

⁷ Hayek, F. (1944). *The Road to Serfdom*. The University of Chicago Press.

and theft, China gets the best of both worlds; it gets to retain its totalitarian system while benefiting from other people's creativity and turning it against them. While socialism is a bad economic system, it is not slowing China down and China remains the number one threat to the U.S.

By utilizing some of Sun Tzu's principles, the U.S. can create an asymmetric strategy to counter China's strategy. The first step is to acknowledge that China is not an ally of the U.S. and refuse to continue to be manipulated by them. *The Hundred-Year Marathon* says, "Even though he was one of its biggest advocates, Sun Tzu warned against falling for deception by clever adversaries."⁸ The U.S. must radically change its approach from one of cooperation, or even containment, to one of blunting their power and building ours. The U.S. can accomplish said blunting and building strategy asymmetrically by building our power at a cost lower than the one China incurs to advance their agenda. China's autocratic regime gives it the advantage of vast control over its economic base and freedom to move without checks and balances or public opinion. Consequently, they can move covertly, decisively, and ruthlessly, often utilizing massive resources and plotting long-term strategies. However, America has great advantages too. Its republican system offers allies and adversaries alike voice opportunities, openly projects American intentions and ambitions, and frequently offer global goods provision. The U.S. does not threaten to dominate its allies the way China does, which makes it more acceptable. The book *The Long Game* says, "Critically, these advantages also ensure that the country can attract the allies, immigrants, and capital that underpin liberal order, technological innovation, military power, and dollar dominance. These are the foundations of American order, and they provide a unique advantage relative to China."⁹ If America can strengthen their foundations while weakening China's, they can effectively counteract China's rise as the next global superpower.

A strong economy is the undergirding of a country. Without a strong economy, a country cannot be strong militarily, politically, or globally. One of the areas the U.S. must focus the most on is blunting China's use of economics to strong-arm other countries into working with them. Calling for multilateralization and institutionalization of China's economic endeavors, namely the Belt and Road Initiative, will frustrate their political manipulation. Encouraging multilateralization of BRI and engaging in co-investment in exchange for equity and adherence to high standards and key reporting requirements could prevent unfortunate outcomes, give regional states a voice, provide transparency, and frustrate China's political arm-twisting. In addition, the U.S. should seek to educate developing countries on how to navigate major infrastructure projects so that they are not manipulated by China. A team of specialists such as economists, diplomats, lawyers, and development experts can help countries avoid bad deals and push for better terms. By blunting BRI and helping developing countries from being fooled by China, the U.S. can undermine China's economic and political arm-twisting.

A strong military is key to a global superpower. A superpower must be strong enough to protect its own borders, provide military aid to its allies, and maintain deterrence with its enemies. As mentioned previously, China has invested in asymmetric warfare to challenge the U.S. Their strategy is sometimes referred to as "anti-access/ area denial" which means their weapons are designed to deny freedom of movement to the U.S. in East Asia. The U.S. is open to drawing from their approach and building our own denial capabilities, which would result in a

⁸ Ibid, 2.

⁹ Doshi, R. (2021). *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*. Oxford University Press.

kind of “No Man’s Sea.” No actor could control waters or islands or conduct amphibious operations in the First Island Chain. The U.S. asymmetric weapons would be things such as long-range precision strike, unmanned underwater vehicles, and high-speed strike weapons. Changing the U.S. approach to warfare with China will beat them at their own game and reduce the U.S. military’s vulnerability.

U.S. political blunting is important to slow the rise of China. Just as China was able to undermine and forestall decisions in multilateral organizations such as APEC and ARF, the U.S. needs to become a part of Chinese-led institutions. This would allow the U.S. to keep an eye on them, improve them, or, if that is not possible, stall them at lower cost than it takes for China to build them. Organizations could include Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) which China has used to set economic and security norms across Asia. The U.S. should also contest China’s influence in the UN and other global bodies. Rather than allow China to put their candidate in a leading position, the U.S. should play a spoiler role and try to dissuade people from voting for China’s candidate. By taking a page out of China’s asymmetric strategy book, the U.S. can combat their influence and effects.

Sun Tzu’s *Art of War* is a timeless classic with principles that are still applicable today. His ideas on deception, intelligence gathering, and exploitation of weakness are genius strategies with implications not just for the military, but also for contemporary intelligence collection and government policies. China has seen the value and wisdom in employing Sun Tzu’s principles in their goal to overthrow the U.S. It is time that the U.S. begin learning from Sun Tzu and allow his thoughts on wisdom, not just force alone to win a fight, influence their policies when engaging adversaries. If the U.S. can grasp the importance of asymmetrical means to achieve a desired end, then national security will be stronger than it has been in years. It is time for the U.S. to apply Sun Tzu’s principles to contemporary threats and rise to meet the challenges they present.

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