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The US in Afghanistan: Follow Sun Tzu rather than Clausewitz to Victory

by Ben Zweibelson

Over the past nine years United States counterinsurgency strategy reflected a reliance on Clausewitzian industrial-era tenets with a faulty emphasis on superior western technology, doctrine fixated on lethal operations, and a western skewed perspective on *jus ad bellum* (just cause for war). American military culture is largely responsible for the first two contextual biases, while western society is liable for the third in response to September 11, 2001. To turn this operational failure around, the U.S. military instrument of power should replace the teachings of 19th century German military strategist Carl Von Clausewitz with Ancient Chinese strategist Sun Tzu and abandon the aforementioned contextual factors in favor of more appropriate counterinsurgency alternatives. These include an increased emphasis on civil-military relations, *jus in bello* (just conduct during war) through non-lethal operations, and quantifiable conflict resolution that includes negotiating with *moderate* Taliban militia groups, as unpalatable as that sounds to military purists. This paper stresses that *moderates* do not include radical Islamic terrorists or non-native fighters.

Sun Tzu's ancient military philosophy of indirectness and gradualism runs counter-culture with much of mainstream western military strategy. Western reliance on superior technology and firepower shaped American counterinsurgency doctrine to be largely lethal in nature and enemy focused. Clausewitz instructed generations of military officers that the destruction of the enemy's army is the primary goal in all combat¹; therefore, all political-military conflict results in offensive action where attrition of the enemy force becomes a universal requirement. Clausewitzian war theory 'worked' in both world wars in that the Allies did accomplish their desired goals; however critics such as Israeli strategist Shimon Naveh raise valid questions on whether Clausewitz's fixation on offensive action and attrition warfare helped or hindered the Allied causes². Despite Clausewitzian strategy's seemingly illogical structure, application of his theories in the major 20th century conflicts created an enduring military school of war strategy with 'On War' taking a sacred position.

Afghanistan experienced offensive violence and attrition theory well before American Special Forces entered the country after 9-11. Two decades earlier, Soviet concentration on enemy insurgents in their 1979-1988 Afghan War resulted in similar conditions that U.S. Forces currently face in our ninth year of Afghan conflict; we face a patient and adaptive enemy that continues to circumvent our superior military technology and lethal applications. To use an analogy, western military forces focus on the enemy as if playing chess; all chess games are offensive based and the players focus on destroying the enemy's pieces (offensive action) to render the king vulnerable (decisive victory) and win. Our enemies today refuse to adhere to any

¹ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (translated with an introduction by Anatol Rapoport; Penguin Books, 1968) 302-305.

² Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: the Evolution of Operational Theory* (Frank Cass Publishers, 1997) 41-44, 48-51.

of these rules, or even use chess pieces. They are playing an entirely different game with incompatible objectives, moves, and pieces. *Takfiri*³ and Al Qaeda factions exploited western military institutional strengths over the past nine years and are now poised to outlast a second military superpower in conflict. Our enemy rejects Clausewitz, and turns the notion of ‘attrition’ on its head by accepting subsequent tactical defeats to wear down national resolve. In essence, they sacrifice all of their chess pieces to drive away the player from the board; they will win by outlasting despite western offensive tactical success. Yet the American military forces can change the tide if fundamentally asymmetrical changes in current counterinsurgency strategy occur immediately.

Western culture holds a self-interested perspective that American forces ‘have the right to retribution’ through offensive military action against the Taliban and Al Qaeda due to the tragedy of 9-11. This modern *jus ad bellum* adaptation works well within the political and social echo chambers in western society, but it translates poorly in the Islamic World and specifically Afghanistan. With a largely illiterate tribal-based society located in a geographically remote and inhospitable section of the world, the Afghan people have generally two things that bind them: Islamic ideology and a shared history of war and occupation by various imperialistic powers. Where western society sees brave American liberators in our deployed forces in Afghanistan, the general Islamic population sees the same soldiers as infidel occupiers forcing tribal groups into an unnatural national entity that conforms to western societal values. Al Qaeda and *Takfiri* factions have capitalized on the cultural divide concerning *jus ad bellum* and used faulty western perceptions in highly effective information campaigns. Military forces in Afghanistan must acknowledge that regardless of how supportive western society remains, as long as foreign soldiers are on the ground deep in Islamic territory the enemy will play a home-court advantage concerning the war of ideas and *jus ad bellum* perception of the greater Islamic population.

Sun Tzu understood that “an indispensable preliminary to battle was to attack the mind of the enemy.”⁴ In order to accomplish this with our enemy, the American military must cede *jus ad bellum* and instead focus on *jus in bello* to target the true objective of an insurgency, the population. By doing this, they will embrace the core strategy of Sun Tzu: “Thus, what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy’s strategy.”⁵ By conceding the *jus ad bellum* to ideological and cultural differences between western and Islamic societies, the American and Coalition military in tandem with the Afghanistan government can deflect a powerful enemy advantage and target the enemy strategy of influencing the Afghanistan population. *Jus in bello* should become how the coalition approaches every operation from the tactical to the strategic level. Whether lethal or non-lethal in nature, Coalition and host nation security forces (HNSF) must adhere to a rigid *jus in bello* doctrine that emphasizes security and stability of the population over secondary enemy-centric objectives. *Jus in bello* should become the vehicle through which the military demonstrates that “we and GIRoA [Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan] have the capability and commitment to protect and support the

³ *Takfiri* is an Arabic word that comes from the root ‘*takfir*’ which translates into an important Islamic ideological concept. A Muslim is forbidden from killing other Muslims according to the teachings of the Koran. However, a Muslim that violates or deviates from the Koran and Islamic teachings could be labeled a ‘*takfiri*’ which correlates in the Christian faith as ‘blasphemy.’ Other Muslims are authorized by conservative interpretations of Islamic ideology to kill any Muslim that is a *takfiri*. The Islamo-fascist groups such as *Al Qaeda* and radical Taliban elements use *takfiri* to convince the rest of the Islamic society that Muslims are valid targets for terror attacks provided they fall under the *takfir* category.

⁴ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (translated with an introduction by Samuel B. Griffith; Oxford University Press, 1971) 41.

⁵ Sun Tzu, 77.

people... we must turn perceptions from fear and uncertainty to trust and confidence.”⁶ In order to accomplish this *jus in bello* transformation, the military must next abandon the western military over-reliance on technology and Clausewitzian offensive destructive strategy and instead embrace Sun Tzu’s ‘bloodless victory’ methods through the alternate contextual factors of civil-military relations and human-based intelligence emphasis.

Griffith wrote that Sun Tzu “did not conceive the object of military action to be the annihilation of the enemy’s army, the destruction of his cities, and the wastage of his countryside.”⁷ However, from 2001 through 2009 the overall Coalition counterinsurgency strategy fixated on lethal offensive operations against the enemy. They continue today with recent musings on simplifying current *rules of engagement* (ROE) under the new General Petraeus initiatives.⁸ Aggressive force protection distanced our forces from the Afghan population both physically and philosophically. While many enemy Al Qaeda and Taliban operatives were killed or captured over the past nine years, Afghanistan is arguably in far worse shape in 2010 than it was in 2003. “He who struggles for victory with naked blades is not a good general.”⁹

Sun Tzu’s stance on lethal operations contrasts sharply with traditional American strategic culture that infuses Clausewitz with American eagerness; “to seek out and destroy the enemy’s military force, to achieve a crushing victory over enemy armies, was still the avowed purpose and the central aim of American strategy in both world wars...”¹⁰ Conventional offensive operations of shock and awe capitalize on the contextual factors that favor American strengths: technology, superior firepower, and conventional wars of attrition against industrialized nations. American forces expended blood and treasure in OEF over the past nine years primarily due to codified institutional pressure that resists change. According to military historian Builder, “Part of the Army is...hanging on to an image of the Army at its finest year, the last year of World War II.”¹¹ Builder goes on to say “significant, rapid change is almost certain to be imposed from the outside and vigorously resisted from the inside”¹² when dealing with changing how the military employs strategy in a conflict.

The U.S. military should acknowledge the errors of the past nine years of over-reliance on failed counterinsurgency strategy and break from it with General Petraeus taking charge of the helm. Sun Tzu’s alternate strategy of seeking a ‘bloodless victory’ by not putting a premium on killing and is a dynamically different strategy of warfare than what American military culture is accustomed with. Civil-military operations traditionally have taken a subordinate position to lethal operations in the military strategic toolbox. U.S. military must empower commanders, Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), and HNSF leadership to place CMO into an ‘alpha male’ position in counterinsurgency practice. Non-lethal targeting must supersede lethal targeting from the tactical to the strategic level. As discussed earlier, *Jus in bello* should become

⁶ Stanley McChrystal, *ISAF Commander’s Counterinsurgency Guidance* (Headquarters, International Security Assistance Force, Kabul, Afghanistan, 2009) 4.

⁷ Sun Tzu, 40.

⁸ <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2010/0629/Afghanistan-war-General-Petraeus-rethinking-rules-of-engagement>. Accessed on internet on 12 July 2010.

⁹ Sun Tzu, 78.

¹⁰ Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War; A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. New York, 1973) 475.

¹¹ Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War* (RAND Corporation Research Study; The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1989) 38.

¹² Carl H. Builder, 39.

the moral compass from which the military and Afghan government implements all operations. These operations must emphasize CMO as the favored action with the core objectives revolving around the population and their security and protection. “We will not win simply by killing insurgents.”¹³ The final recommendation of this paper deals with the final contextual factor thus far overlooked by official U.S. military and foreign policy. It also runs counter-culture to the aforementioned affliction towards killing insurgents. This last factor for conflict resolution deals with moderate Taliban militia leaders and their proposed reintegration into a post-conflict Afghanistan with political influence.

Sun Tzu placed the policies of attacking an enemy army and population centers at the bottom of his list of offensive strategy principles of ‘supreme importance.’¹⁴ Instead, he valued subduing the enemy “without fighting...”¹⁵ by attacking the enemy’s strategy and then *disrupting* his alliances. The final critical contextual factor necessary for implementation is a conflict resolution policy that echoes previous counterinsurgency success in OIF under the ‘Sons of Iraq’ awakening movement. Conflict resolution in OIF centered largely on integrating former enemy Sunni insurgent militias into tribal-centric grassroots security forces. This was unpalatable for most American leadership initially because like Sun Tzu, the concept of embracing former enemy combatants contradicted institutional tenets held by American military forces shaped by past conventional successes. Clausewitz dictates the offensive destruction of enemy fielded forces; the enemy chess pieces are removed from play. Yet in this conflict, captured pawns serve national objectives when returned to the chessboard in a reintegration process that contradicts Clausewitzian attrition methodology. Afghan and American military forces must contemplate *prima facie* the difference between a temporary social movement such as German Facism (Nazi Party) and the pervasive ideological and cultural trappings of conservative Islamic movements like the Taliban. The Taliban (طالبان) literally means ‘student’ (from the Arabic root to study; *taleb* gnorts htiw snezitic suonegidni yllaitnesse era dna (طالب) local and tribal ties to the isolated Afghan communities. “In this respect, trying to rid Afghanistan of the Taliban by military means would be like a foreign country trying to rid the U.S. of Ku Klux Klan supporters by military means.”¹⁶

Over the past nine years, Coalition forces employed superior technology and firepower to perform lethal operations on Al Qaeda and Taliban forces as the primary COIN strategy. In General McChrystal’s words, “looking at the war in simplistic Manichaeian terms—save as many good guys as possible while taking out as many bad guys as possible—was a mistake.”¹⁷ Outside the core Taliban minority, the majority of Taliban militia forces are “simply peripheral Taliban militants. They joined the Taliban as a pragmatic opportunity for advancement in a country where most power comes from conservative Islam or guns.”¹⁸ Conflict resolution in Afghanistan will never promise a functional Afghan government with full tribal integration across the scattered remote mountain villages without Coalition and Afghan Forces adapting a hybrid *Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration* (DDR) model as successfully executed in Iraq. Instead of disgruntled Sunni minority groups in Iraq, the *moderate* Taliban militias and

¹³ Stanley McChrystal, *ISAF Commander’s Counterinsurgency Guidance* (Headquarters, International Security Assistance Force, Kabul, Afghanistan, 2009) 1.

¹⁴ Sun Tzu, 77-78 paraphrased.

¹⁵ Sun Tzu, 77.

¹⁶ Azeem Ibrahim, *Afghanistan’s Way forward Must Include the Taliban* (Los Angeles Times Opinion Online; 09 December 2009; latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-ibrahim9-2009dec09,0,588847.story)

¹⁷ Azeem Ibrahim, *Afghanistan’s Way forward Must Include the Taliban*

¹⁸ Azeem Ibrahim, *Afghanistan’s Way forward Must Include the Taliban*

leadership should be courted with a hybrid DDR construct where Taliban forces establish local security zones around their tribal affiliated locations. CMO coordination with operational funds and GIoA support at all levels would facilitate this radical shift of Coalition strategy and create the conditions so “people are more attracted to building and protecting their communities than destroying them.”¹⁹ This strategy embraces Sun Tzu’s philosophy of a ‘bloodless victory’ by ‘disrupting enemy alliances.’ It also follows western strategist Liddell Hart’s theories on strategy; “[t]he perfection of strategy would be, therefore, to produce a decision without any serious fighting...the aim is fulfilled if...the enemy is led to abandon his purpose.”²⁰

The *moderate* Taliban, once integrated into a hybrid DDR model akin to the Iraqi ‘Awakening Movement’ model, would stabilize their provinces, and provide significant intelligence on core Taliban and Al Qaeda targets. With true cooperation, they would lend strong evidence to the Afghan people and Islamic World at large that western interests were focused on restoring the security and stability of Afghan society while combating the legitimate *jus ad bellum* enemy target, Al Qaeda. The past nine years has not provided much evidence to the Afghan people that superior military technology and superpower militaries can solve insurgency problems other than prolong the suffering of a war-torn society. The time to adjust course from Clausewitz to Sun Tzu is upon us.

In conclusion, Coalition forces in Afghanistan must make a radical departure from the previous nine years of flawed counterinsurgency strategy. Our previous emphasis on Clausewitzian attritional offensive coupled with an over-reliance upon technological superiority and ‘shock and awe’ doctrine have not produced the results necessary for accomplishing national strategic ends or those of the Afghan population. Our self-motivated western perception that 9-11 provided a valid *jus ad bellum* for extensive occupation of multiple Middle Eastern countries continues to codify resistance against deployed military operations in the Middle East. Select Sun Tzu principles and strategy applied immediately would run counter-culture to institutional knowledge and past conventional successes. However, unique ideological, cultural, and geo-political factors that comprise the Afghanistan counterinsurgency are better suited for indirect military action. Sun Tzu’s tenet of ‘bloodless victory’ through ‘attacking enemy strategy and alliances’ through indirect methods are a proscribed solution to break out of the groupthink of the past nine years of military stalemate in Afghanistan. Contextual factors such as superior technology and offensive enemy-centric doctrine must take a back seat to a new emphasis on civil-military relations, an over-emphasis on *jus in bello* to repair public perceptions, and a hybrid-DDR adaptation for conflict resolution with moderate Taliban forces. By separating indigenous moderate Taliban from ‘core Taliban’ and foreign fighter Al Qaeda forces, Coalition Forces could utilize Sun Tzu principles through non-lethal means. “In attacking a great state, if you can divide your enemy’s forces your strength will be more than sufficient.”²¹ Until now, core Taliban and Al Qaeda have used this Sun Tzu maxim against Coalition Forces. By applying the contextual factor recommendations of this paper along with a cognitive framework based upon select tenets of Sun Tzu, Coalition Forces can turn the counterinsurgency upside-down and convert existing weaknesses into strengths.

¹⁹ Stanley McChrystal, 4.

²⁰ B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (ACSC Warfare Studies Coursebook, Maxwell AFB AY10) 251.

²¹ Sun Tzu, 138.

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