

THE US WARS OF THE 21ST CENTURY AND SUN TZU'S ART OF WAR

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Abstract

The strategies pursued by the U.S. to control violence, wherever national interest was threatened, saw significant challenges in the 21st Century. By juxtaposing Sun Tzu's 'Art of War' (400-320 BC) to the U.S.' policies in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, the strategic follies of those campaigns can be better explained. The 'Art of War' argues that war is a matter of vital importance to the State; a matter of life or death; a matter of survival or ruin. Its thorough understanding is, therefore, an existential necessity. On the subject of understanding the enemy and one's own strategies, Sun Tzu prophesied that ignorance of oneself and ignorance of one's enemy is a recipe for disaster. Sun outlines the fundamentals of strategy and tactics in a simple, ageless and succinct manner. At times he displays disdain for war by admitting the significance of the 'evils' of war-waging, without comprehending which wars can never be won. In brief, 'Art of War' is still relevant in understanding the criticality of 'moral,' 'intellectual' and 'circumstantial' factors of war. Failure in understanding these moral, intellectual and circumstantial factors led to the setbacks faced by the U.S. subsequent to the Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) invasions.

Key words: *Indirect Strategy, Purpose of War, Afghan Invasion 2001, Counterinsurgency, Iraq Invasion 2003, Harmony, Correlation and Contextualization, Al Qaeda*

War has remained a perpetual phenomenon of critical importance in human societies. The criticality stems from the unintended consequences of imprudently prosecuted wars. War is essentially a calculated endeavour for victory, reflected in a subdued opponent. Though apparently chaotic and emotional, war is actually an organized and rational activity, requiring immense sagacity at the strategic level. Strategies to prevent and deter or to seek and win wars have been the fundamental ambition of US political actors. Owing to major changes in the ends, ways and means of

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violence, the strategies pursued by the US to control violence, wherever national interest was threatened, saw significant challenges in the 21st century. For students of world politics, finding theories about warfare that can best explain contemporary strategy is essential. This paper argues that the strategic follies of the US in Afghanistan and Iraq wars can be better explained by juxtaposing Sun Tzu's 'Art of War' projections to the miserable outcomes of those campaigns.

The emerging character of war

The motives and purposes of war remain the same in the 21st century, but its methodology and construct have seen significant variations. The lasting nature but changing character of war is often argued.¹ The diffusion of power, spreading of hateful ideologies, age of information technologies, loose networks of transnational terrorism and innovative means of destruction have given rise to amorphous patterns of conflict that have confronted the US in the 21st century. Instead of aggrieved states challenging each other with violence as the sole actors on the centre stage of warfare, violent ideological franchises have also pushed themselves into the spotlight. Strategic competition composed of inter-state rivalries is mostly nuanced but at the same time the possibility of an armed conflict cannot be ruled out with ramifications for core US interests. The US faces conflict levels that have merged and morphed, along with mixed levels of warfare, sometimes called hybrid wars, low intensity conflicts, proxy wars, irregular wars or unrestricted wars.²

The mutation of sectarian rivalries in Iraq leading to formation of self-styled Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the unending Taliban resistance in Afghanistan, both resulting from US the intervention, are a glimpse of the complexities of contemporary warfare. External groups often support intra-state violence on ethnic, ideological or sectarian grounds. The multi-ordered economic and political fallouts in these wars result in deficit spending, war weariness, global demographic disruptions, exacerbated geopolitical competitions and proliferating radical ideologies. Some examples of such fallouts are the rising US debt seen as a national security threat, disillusionment of Syrian, Iraqi, Yemeni and Afghan populations, Syrian migration crisis, growing Russian influence in the Middle East, the Saudi-Iranian standoff and the spate of terrorism in France and Belgium.

Sun Tzu's exhortations on war and strategy

To put the emerging character of war in context, Sun Tzu's exhortations are an essential reading. The fundamentals of strategy and tactics are outlined

¹ Colin S. Gray, "War-Continuity in Change, and Change in Continuity," *Parameters* 40, no. 2 (2010): 5-13.

² Tony Corn, "Peaceful Rise through Unrestricted Warfare: Grand Strategy with Chinese Characteristics," *Small Wars Journal*, 2010, <<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/449-corn.pdf>>.

by Sun Tzu in a simple, ageless and succinct manner. He highlights the significance of realism and moderation in contrast to absolutism and extremism in the theory of war and emphasizes upon the indirect strategy in warfare. In fact, Sun Tzu famously exalted the 'acme of skill'³ in subduing the enemy without fighting. All of Sun Tzu's expositions about the higher direction of war aim to reinforce understanding of the moral, intellectual and circumstantial elements of strategy within the classical Chinese concept of *harmony*,⁴ the organizing principle of optimized situational advantage.

Sun Tzu opens his brief treatise, *The Art of War*⁵, with a chapter titled 'Estimates', saying, "War is a matter of vital importance to the State; the province of life or death; the road to survival or ruin. It is mandatory that it be thoroughly studied."⁶ On 'Waging War' he said, "when the army marches abroad, the treasury will be emptied at home," emphasizing, "victory is the main object in war," and "when the army engages in protracted campaigns, the resources of the state will not be suffice," assuring that "there has never been a protracted war from which a country has benefitted." He reemphasized upon the detriments of protraction, saying, "when your weapons are dulled and ardor damped, your strength exhausted and treasure spent, neighboring rulers will take advantage of your distress to act," making it impossible to dominate strategically. He compared war to fire, which will engulf armies entangled due to protraction, saying "those unable to understand the dangers inherent in employing troops are equally unable to understand the advantageous way of doing so."⁷

On understanding the enemy and one's own strategies, he said, "know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril, ... when you are ignorant of the enemy but know yourself, your chances of winning or losing are equal, ... if ignorant both of your enemy and of yourself,

³ Samuel B. Griffith, trans., *Sun Tzu - The Art of War* (London: OUP, 1963): 77.

⁴ Zhang Lihua, "China's Traditional Cultural Values and National Identity," *Carnegie-Tsinghua Center - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 21, 2013, <<http://carnegietsinghua.org/publications/?fa=53613>>.

⁵ Art of War is originally divided into thirteen very short chapters, each covering some important aspect of war, i.e., Estimates, Waging War, Offensive Strategy, Dispositions, Energy, Weaknesses and Strength, Manoeuvre, The Nine Variables, Marches, Terrain, The Nine Varieties of Ground, Attack by Fire, Employment of Secret Agents. Insightful maxims comprise each chapter, some of which are apparently simplistic, while most are extremely meaningful and timeless. Correlation of these maxims to one's era requires imaginativeness. There is lot of emphasis on deliberation before waging war and indirectness of approach in strategy. The age of this treatise is between 400-320 BC, within the context of one and a half century (450 – 300 BC) marred by excessive warfare between tribal states that resulted in lot of bloodshed and many vanquished armies. In Warring States China, scholastic debates on strategy naturally evoked interest. Sun Tzu, who also displayed generalship in those wars, endeavoured to chart out a course for future strategists based on his observations and experience.

⁶ Griffith, *Sun Tzu - The Art of War*, 63.

⁷ Ibid., 73.

you are certain in every battle to be in peril." Li Ch'uan, one of the earliest interpreters of *The Art of War*, explains: "Such people are called 'mad bandits'. What can they expect if not defeat?"⁸

Besides defeat, the embroilment of the attacking forces causes complete socioeconomic disruption, indicated by Sun Tzu: "where the army is, prices are high (because everyone covets the extraordinary profits to be made), when prices rise wealth of the people is exhausted."⁹ About the aftermath of war, Sun Tzu said: "Treat the captives well, and take care of them, ... with magnanimity and sincerity so that they may be used by us; it is called *winning a battle and becoming stronger*." *The Art of War* also cautions about needlessly enraging your enemy as "rage would multiply their strength by ten." Sun Tzu emphasized not to put a premium on killing because "what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy, i.e., to balk the enemy's plans."¹⁰

Lastly, on the significance of a clear understanding of the *purpose* of war, Sun Tzu succinctly remarked, "one who is confused in purpose cannot respond to his enemy," thus outlining five circumstances for the prediction of victory. Firstly, the one who knows when he can fight and when he cannot, will be victorious. Secondly, the one who knows how to use both large and small forces will be victorious. Thirdly, the one whose ranks are united in purpose will be victorious. Fourthly, the one who is prudent and lies in wait for an enemy who is imprudent will be victorious. Fifthly, the one whose generals are able and are not interfered with by the government will be victorious: "the supreme requirements of generalship are a clear perception, the harmony of his host (the government he serves), a profound strategy coupled with far-reaching plans, an understanding of the seasons and an ability to examine the human factors."¹¹

Did these exhortations have practical value in guiding the US strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq? Were the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq planned with as much deliberate thinking as suggested by Sun Tzu? To answer these questions, we turn briefly to the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, which were major wars that have been resistant to a meaningful victory. In our understanding, the planning of 'Operation Enduring Freedom'¹² (OEF) and 'Operation Iraqi Freedom'¹³ (OIF) did not reflect deference to the wisdom in *The Art of War*.

⁸ Ibid., 84.

⁹ Ibid., 74.

¹⁰ Ibid., 75-77.

¹¹ Ibid., 82, 87.

¹² Daniel Bolger, *Why We Lost* (Boston: HMH, 2014): 25-45.

¹³ Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007).

The Afghan invasion, 2001

The public vengeance arising from the tragedy of 9/11 drove the US decision to wage war against the Taliban Government and the Al Qaeda terrorist network in Afghanistan. The ensuing war aimed at toppling the Taliban Government by providing military and financial support to Taliban's arch rivals, the Northern Alliance. The next phase was to defeat Taliban's insurgency, protect the population from Taliban, win popular support for the counterinsurgency, and build Afghan infrastructure and state institutions. Employed as early as 26th September, 2001, the CIA team *Jawbreakers*, began to garner anti-Taliban forces, with all-out war raging on 7th October.¹⁴ Simply, the time period that elapsed between 9/11 and the initiation of war plans is indicative of the haste to go to war on part of the US Government. Contrary to Sun Tzu's exhortation of thorough study of the decision to go to war, being a matter of life or death for a nation, the US decision seemed considerably less deliberated. A widely shared understanding of victory, the main object of war, was not deliberately developed because of the failure to understand both the enemy's and one's own capabilities. The enormous cost of nearly one trillion dollars led to the 'certain peril' predicted by Sun Tzu, as the decision-makers were ignorant of their own and the enemy's potential.¹⁵ The costly political missteps in Afghanistan amounted to hundreds of billions of dollars wasted in mismanaged projects,¹⁶ which eroded the US public confidence in their policy-makers' and policy-implementers' capabilities. The inherent dangers of employing troops was not deliberated, hence the military could not be employed gainfully. Similarly, the economic disruption and its fallout theorized by Sun Tzu could also not be predicted despite the abysmal socio-economic history of Afghanistan. Rather, the unrealistic economic bubble of the war economy, propped up by multilateral aid and local rent-seeking, was misinterpreted as a sign of economic improvement.¹⁷

The US led invasion of Afghanistan could not achieve its desired objectives due to a "simplistic application of hard power and development work," as described by Jack Fairweather in his latest book, *The Good War*.¹⁸ Billions of dollars were thrown in unwittingly, exacerbating an already raging

¹⁴ "Afghanistan War: 2001-2014," accessed July 17, 2016, <<https://www.britannica.com/event/Afghanistan-War>>.

¹⁵ Geoff Dyer and Chloe Sorvino in Washington, "Afghan War Costs US \$1 Trillion, Hastening Retreat," *CNBC*, December 15, 2014, <<http://www.cnbc.com/2014/12/15/-for-us-cost-1tn.html>>.

¹⁶ Chloe Sorvino, "Costly Missteps Mark US Road to War," *Financial Times*, December 14, 2014, <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/3f5466bc-83d0-11e4-8a84-00144feabdc0.html#slide0>>.

¹⁷ Faridullah Sahil, "Afghan Economy Trembles Amid Foreign Investment Decline: ACCI," accessed July 17, 2016, <<http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/23747-afghan-economy-trembles-amid-foreign-investment-decline-acci>>.

¹⁸ Jack Fair weather, *The Good War: Why We Couldn't Win the Peace in Afghanistan* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

civil war by preferring certain factions over others in both fighting and development. The wider security commitment needed for the development projects was extremely difficult to fund and implement. The ruthless internal power struggle of Afghans was aggravated when certain groups exploiting the US preferences pursued vested interests. Progress could not be achieved in Afghanistan because the problem was “the old triad of atavism, avarice and opportunism.”¹⁹ Thus, inability to understand the dangers inherent in employing troops led to their disadvantageous entanglement in a protracted war for which the resources of state could not suffice.

Sun Tzu had suggested ‘winning a battle and becoming stronger’ by taking care of the captives so they might be used later on and cautioned against needlessly enraging the enemy so as not to multiply their strength. The US prisoner abuse in Afghanistan is now a well-documented part of the country’s abysmal political history recorded by their Senate showing “the willingness to face an ugly truth and say ‘never again.’”²⁰ The widespread abuse incited the Taliban further and reinforced their age-old societal norm of ‘revenge’ against the invading forces. Even when tactical battles were won by the US and Afghan forces against segments of the Taliban, the social media driven impression of rampant torture and incarceration of prisoners caused disaffection in the wider public, weakening the US forces’ position as predicted in *The Art of War*. The trend of prisoner abuse permeated from the mentoring US-led coalition to the mentored Afghan indigenous forces leading to further multiplication in Taliban rank and file due to enragement caused by such abuse at the hands of locals.²¹

Sun Tzu’s exhortation of not putting a premium on killing, rather attacking the enemy’s strategy, remained unheeded in the US Afghan War. For example, night raids by the US Special Forces caused a large number of unwarranted killings duly acknowledged by independent war research groups in the US. According to one such report, more than 1,500 civilians were killed by the night raids during a short period of 10 months in 2010-2011. In a total of 6,282 raids, the US Special Operations Forces killed around 2,844 alleged insurgents along with ‘relatively few women and children killed by accident.’ The report concluded, “the socio-cultural and physical setting of the raids guarantees that the percentage of civilians killed is extremely high.”²²

¹⁹ Rob Johnson, “Misunderstanding War,” *The American Interest*, April 13, 2015, <<http://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/04/13/misunderstanding-war/>>.

²⁰ Mark Mazzetti, “Panel Faults C.I.A. Over Brutality and Deceit in Terrorism Interrogations,” *The New York Times*, December 9, 2014, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/10/world/senate-intelligence-committee-cia-torture-report.html>>.

²¹ Azam Ahmed, “Prisoner Abuse Still Widespread in Afghanistan, U.N. Says,” *The New York Times*, February 25, 2015, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/26/world/asia/abuse-of-detainees-remains-widespread-in-afghanistan-un-says.html>>.

²² “U.S. Night Raids Killed Over 1,500 Afghan Civilians in Ten Months - World Can’t Wait,” accessed July 24, 2016, <<http://www.worldcantwait.net/index.php/features/afghanistan-pakistan/7425-us-night-raids-killed-over-1500-afghan-civilians-in-ten-months>>.

Instead of pursuing the strategy of targeted killings, Sun Tzu had emphasized on attacking the enemy strategy, i.e., on balking the enemy's plans. The Taliban strategy in Afghanistan had been to control as much territory as possible, dominate the perception of winning and use the negative public sentiment against foreign troops to reduce favourable space for the US and Afghan military forces. The US could neither prevent Taliban from gradually expanding their territorial control nor counter the burgeoning perception about their winning streak, thus, failing to create favourable strategic and operational space for the US forces and the struggling Afghan military to operate with more freedom. In order to attack the Taliban strategy, the offensive capability of the Afghan forces needed to be focused upon from the outset to prevent Taliban's control of territory, instead of which, the offensive capability of the US forces was over-capitalized to pursue a killing spree. Resultantly, Taliban now control more territory in Afghanistan than ever, since their ouster.²³ In the perception domain too, owing to the US impatience to announce drawdown schedules, the Taliban's strategy of creating an 'impression of winning' could not be defeated. Finally, the catalyst of 'foreign forces' also remains there to be used by Taliban to foment public sentiment against the Coalition and its 'altruistic' ambitions. A premium on killing the enemy prevented devising far-reaching strategies to 'balk' the enemy's plans.

In matters of strategy, Sun Tzu had emphasized clarity of purpose to be of cardinal significance. Dan Bolger is a retired US military Lieutenant General who published a scathing criticism of the US purpose of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, pointedly titled *Why We Lost*.²⁴ He rightly puts the blame on the US military hierarchy for pursuing such a vague purpose for war as counter-insurgency. It led to wastage of billions of dollars, thousands of US and coalition military lives and hundreds of thousands of lives of Afghans and Iraqis, with a compounded number of radicalized population continuing to haunt peace prospects in those regions.²⁵ The US 'hope' of strengthening the Afghan forces to a level where they could ward off a Taliban takeover in major parts of the war-torn country was not a very well defined purpose of war either.²⁶ The unclear thought on the purpose of war in Afghanistan, beyond the defeat of Al Qaeda, predictably led to the much-dreaded 'protraction', which Sun Tzu had so presciently despised.

²³ Lynne O'Donnell, "The Taliban Now Hold More Ground in Afghanistan than at Any Point since 2001," *Military Times*, June 16, 2016, <<http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/pentagon/2016/06/16/afghanistan-nicholson-commander-pentagon-report-war/85972056/>>.

²⁴ Bolger, *Why We Lost*.

²⁵ Spencer Ackerman, "General Dan Bolger Says What the US Does Not Want to Hear: Why We Lost," *The Guardian*, November 10, 2014, sec. US news, <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2014/nov/10/general-dan-bolger-iraq-afghanistan-why-we-lost>>.

²⁶ Nick Paton Walsh "Afghanistan War: Just What Was the Point?," *CNN*, accessed July 16, 2016, <<http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/25/asia/afghanistan-war-analysis/index.html>>.

The Taliban regime and the terrorists affiliated with Al Qaeda thriving in Afghanistan under state patronage were identified as the enemy. The US military and covert operatives supporting the local forces of Northern Alliance, the sworn enemies of Taliban, constituted the overall force organized to defeat Taliban and cause their regime to fall by a strategy of 'Shock and Awe.' The amorphous nature of this threat and its potential capability to survive the onslaught, disperse and engage in guerrilla warfare subsequently was not 'estimated', despite the very recent history of 'Afghan Jihad' against the erstwhile USSR. The enemy was not analyzed in detail and relevant questions were not deliberated. What was the regime's political grounding, its military strength and its ability to reconstitute? What were the demographics of the land? What was the culture? What were the regime's weaknesses that could be exploited in the short term? Would a long term engagement be fruitful? Was direct military engagement the only solution? Sun Tzu had said, "With many calculations, one can win; with few one cannot ...examine the situation (before hostilities) and the outcome will be clearly apparent."²⁷

The 'calculations' of the US' own and allied forces' capabilities were grossly inaccurate. The impact of Afghanistan's warlord culture and absence of any central authority backed by an armed force to enforce the fundamentals of statehood, after toppling the Taliban regime, were not appreciated in the campaign design of OEF. Post-Soviet Afghanistan had remained in complete socio-political turmoil, requiring unimaginable resources for its restructuring. Reconstruction of damages to property and infrastructure inflicted by war and rehabilitation of the people through reinvigoration of economy were to be factored in the concept of operations, if the goodwill of the masses was to be won. The paucity of US forces allowed the terrorists to escape into adjoining Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan, with its tribal dynamics of loose administrative control, creating hideouts. Thus, short-sighted calculation led to the loss in a distant, protracted campaign that contributed to straining the country's economy in combination with the war in Iraq and the 2008 financial crisis.

On the concept of strategic advantage, Sun Tzu said: "In the business of war, there is no invariable strategic advantage which can be relied upon at all times."²⁸ In Afghanistan, the US did not realize the loss of strategic advantage by supporting a non-inclusive Northern Alliance after achieving the initial ouster of Taliban, as it later went about constructing a demographically lopsided power structure in the country. In realization of the existing weakness in the Afghan security machinery, relative to Taliban's strategic advantage of demonstrated power, a shift in the US strategy to encourage negotiation could have been an advantageous strategic move for the US. However, with the recent killing of Taliban leader Mullah Mansour, the US strategic approach whether to achieve victory through fighting or negotiating is unclear. Does it

²⁷ Griffith, *Sun Tzu - The Art of War*, 71.

²⁸ Roger T. Ames, *Sun Tzu - The Art of Warfare* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993): 80.

indicate the US has given up on prospects of a political settlement, taking recourse to seek a military victory over Taliban, illusive for the past fifteen years?²⁹ Is the purpose of victory being sought by Afghan military, with dwindling support of the drawn down US forces, the complete submission of Taliban? With an enhanced mandate of offensive action given to the 8,400 remaining US forces in Afghanistan, will the US – Afghanistan combined effort be able to achieve such a victory? The killing of Mullah Mansour has practically scuttled the Quadrilateral Coordination Group's peace process. Sun Tzu had advised, the victorious would be the one who knows when he can fight and when he cannot, and victory is *the only* purpose of war. Given this advice, the US needs to assess the position of its forces supporting Afghan military's bid to achieve victory under the prevailing political circumstances in Afghanistan. The US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reported in July 2016 that the NATO-backed Afghan Government is in control of 65.6% of districts in Afghanistan, compared to the 70.5% held in January 2016.³⁰ As the Afghan and US-led Coalition do not seem to be heading for victory, the circumstances beg to consider Sun Tzu's advice: 'victorious will be one who knows when he can fight and when he cannot.'

The Iraq invasion, 2003

Roger T. Hames describes the ancient Chinese philosophy of harmony as "the quality of the combination at any one moment created by effectively correlating and contextualizing the available ingredients, whether they be foodstuffs, farmers or infantry."³¹ The failure to have a ruler at the helm who could decide the course of events sagaciously is failed *harmony*. The inability of Bush's team to avoid slowly getting bogged down in Iraq, even after imminent failure of secure-stabilize-reconstruct strategy, was also a case of failed *harmony*. Ignoring the brewing Afghan fiasco at the time, the Bush Administration repeated the same mistakes in designing the campaign to invade Iraq in 2003.³²

The Joint Operation Planning Process (JOPP), as elucidated in the US Joint Services 'keystone' document 'Joint Publication 5-0,' explains the process of joint, inter-agency and multinational campaign designing activities. As exhorted by Sun Tzu, it is an analytic process of 'correlating and contextualizing' all conceivable factors for undertaking a 'thorough study of

²⁹ "Q&A: Drone Strike's Impact on Afghanistan, Pakistan," *United States Institute of Peace*, accessed July 30, 2016, <<http://www.usip.org/publications/2016/05/23/qa-drone-strikes-impact-afghanistan-pakistan>>.

³⁰ Mazin Sidahmed and Spencer Ackerman, "Afghan Forces Lose Ground to Taliban despite Delayed US Troop Withdrawal," *The Guardian*, July 29, 2016, <<http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jul/29/afghan-army-taliban-us-troop-withdrawal>>.

³¹ Ames, *Sun Tzu - The Art of Warfare*, 62.

³² Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

war'. JOPP provides comprehensive methodology for designing a campaign from pre-war to post-war phases. It analyzes the repercussions of Political, Military, Economic, Social, Information and Infrastructure (PMESII) factors on military operations, when faced by a dynamic enemy. The tensions, threats, opportunities and limitations emanating from their own action, the enemy's actor and the operating environment, along with their projected mutations, are factored in the planning. JOPP is meant to analyze the political direction of war into attainable military objectives in order to win a favourable strategic end state.³³ It provides a sound theoretical framework for achieving Sun Tzu's 'harmony' in campaign planning. However, in the case of planning for OIF, the strategic end state of JOPP – broadly expressed conditions that should exist after the conclusion of a campaign were not clearly stated, as was evident from Rumsfeld's strategic directions. Ambiguity in the strategic end state contributed to some extent in the Combatant Commander's short-sighted determination of the strategic military objectives.

The strategic direction for the March 2003 Iraq invasion, OIF, began to take shape as early as 19 September, 2001. The Secretary of Defence, Rumsfeld, during post 9/11 planning, desired to expand the threat visualization to include Iraq.³⁴ As early as 21st November, he provided specific guidance to General Franks, Commander US Central Command. Rumsfeld who considered Saddam's hold on power to be 'brittle', stressed the need to exploit vulnerabilities for quickly eroding Saddam's support, identifying Iraq's northern and southern oil fields, WMDs, missile sites, air defence and the Republican Guard as main objectives, or 'slices' in his parlance. He directed the campaign to be marked by 'surprise, speed, shock and risk' to speed up the regime change. Anticipating the early fall of the regime, he wanted to plan the beginning of military action before moving the entire force, which, in his opinion, might only be needed in the 'worst case'.³⁵ Other guidance aspects for the planning process, which he intended to remain iterative, included deploying Special Operation Forces in the north to work with the Kurds, protecting a provisional government, seizing the western desert, cutting off Baghdad and thinking about a political solution for post-war Iraq.³⁶

Moreover, as the process to plan and crystallize strategic objectives went ahead, Rumsfeld's desired iteration in the planning process became 'constant negotiation',³⁷ which hampered Franks' ability to "collaborate with policymakers in the development of these objectives."³⁸ After going through nine months of 'negotiations', Franks described his strategic military objectives

³³ "Joint Operation Planning; Joint Publication 5-0" (Joint Chief of Staff, 2011): III-7.

³⁴ Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 11.

³⁵ Ibid., 25.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 29.

³⁸ "Joint Operation Planning; Joint Publication 5-0," III-7.

as: the destruction of regime leadership and power base, control and destruction of WMD, preservation of territorial integrity, the elimination of Iraq's ability to threaten its neighbours and the installment of an acceptable provisional or permanent government.³⁹ These objectives clearly lacked in-depth visualization of the enemy, the environment and the post-war developments, reflecting the incoherence of war planning.

Harmonious development of policies and plans is dependent on sound 'correlation and contextualization' of the relevant policy and planning directions. Rumsfeld's initiatives, upon coming into office in 2001, to reduce the size of the US Army, making it more agile, lethal and efficient, achieving more effectiveness with less numbers, was not finding support in the army. The corporate world's efficiencies, which Rumsfeld desired to be incorporated in the army, could not help the army win future wars in complex scenarios, irrespective of how precise and effective the mobility and firepower become. The domestic policy environment was marred by this debate, which, to some extent, also affected common understanding of the operational environment leading to OIF.

Even more detrimental was the assessment given by Chalabi, the controversial Iraqi dissident, in mid-September 2001, totally discounting Saddam's power. He described the northern Iraq as out of Saddam's control, the southern part isolated, armoured forces in poor shape, officers unpaid and the situation ripe for Saddam's toppling by insurgents supported by the US airpower. In his assessment, this would be followed by an uprising, turning Iraq into a stable, pro-western, free market state, while the Iraqi military would help stabilize the country afterwards.⁴⁰ This assessment was biased and it tainted the administration's view on three important facets: the potential of insurgency against Saddam, the 'liberator's image' of the US and the likelihood of getting the maximum out of Iraqi Army after Saddam. The 'composite' understanding of operational environment's 'conditions, circumstances and influences'⁴¹ was disaffected, undermining determination of the strategic approach later.

Another important determinant of OIF planning was how the US intelligence agencies had little direct knowledge about Saddam's weapons programme, despite a \$40 billion budget.⁴² As was proven later, Saddam had no active WMD programme but was only bluffing to keep Iran, and perhaps local dissidents, at bay. Use of WMDs against the US forces, their falling into terrorist hands and their use against dissenting population or unfriendly neighbours dominated the US perception of Saddam's perceived end state, leading to incorrect assumptions. Furthermore, there was no direct or effective link between the Iraqi regime and Al Qaeda, whereas the Bush administration

³⁹ Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 77.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 21.

⁴¹ "Joint Operation Planning; Joint Publication 5-0," III-8.

⁴² Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 144.

needed it as justification for the attack, inculcating a tendency in the US policy analysts to "give the White House what it wanted."⁴³

In the same quest, Saddam's desired end state was visualized by the US planning team as use of WMDs to deter and defeat the invading forces and a determined battle in Baghdad, both of which were concocted and did not happen. Support contemplated from Arab states, Turkey and some other NATO allies, critically needed for employment in post-war Iraq, did not materialize. The desired end state analysis of the environment on Political, Military, Economic, Social, Information and Infrastructure (PMESII) basis proved wrong in most assumptions of each domain. Some examples in the immediate aftermath illustrate the point. A smooth political transition remained a dream, the military could not be reorganized, utilization of oil revenues to jump start the economy could not be orchestrated, the society revolted against the 'occupiers' rather than heralding them as liberators, the information campaign to woo the Iraqis failed and strategic bombing caused irreparable damage to infrastructure; none of these were visualized as the desired end state. Farsighted advice about the global pattern of invasion warfare in the past, suggesting continued violence for 2-3 years in Iraq, was not incorporated in planning.⁴⁴

As the planning process continued, the strategic end state was finally articulated in a top secret document, *Iraq: Goals, Objectives and Strategy*, in mid-August 2002, outlining the administration's recommendations, signed by President Bush a week later. It included eliminating Iraqi threat to its neighbours, liberating the Iraqi people from tyranny and preventing Baghdad from supporting terrorists as the broad goals. The document proposed to utilize all instruments of US national power to achieve those goals and build a moderate, pluralistic and democratic society for the Iraqis with their help, working with a coalition or alone, if necessary. After the fall of Baghdad, the US would demonstrate long-term commitment for reconstruction and reform of Iraqi bureaucracy and security institutions.⁴⁵ Soon thereafter, during the brief to President Bush in September 2002, Franks gleaned the conditions from the administration's guidance to emerge from Iraq's invasion, rather simplistically; deterring other regimes, preventing Saddam from fortress defence in Baghdad, limiting post-hostilities phase to one year or more with heavy reliance on Iraqi forces for internal security. The mismatch in Franks' analysis of the President's direction, under Rumsfeld's tutelage, disrupted the decision making, leading to an ill-defined problem set and an unbalanced ends, ways and means approach.

Ignoring well informed counter opinions on the presence of WMDs and the linkage between Saddam and Al Qaeda, President Bush's policy team went about planning a campaign doomed to fail due to lack of critical thinking in the pre-war calculations. The protraction of war, despised by Sun Tzu, was evident

⁴³ Ibid., 154.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 181.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 83.

before the beginning of OIF. The half-hearted planning of Iraqi reconstruction after the invasion, conceived in policy but not supported in strategy, led to the inevitable quagmire.

Essentially, the treatise of Sun Tzu reflects a dislike of war because of the 'inherent losses' in it. As Sun Tzu observed, "If one is not fully cognizant of the evils of waging war, he cannot be fully cognizant of how to turn it to best account."⁴⁶ Ignoring well informed counter opinions on the presence of WMDs and the linkage between Saddam and Al Qaeda, President Bush's policy team went about planning a campaign doomed to fail due to lack of cognizance 'of the evils of waging war.' Bush's ineptitude in understanding these evils led to an unending civil war in Iraq, introducing wicked complications like ISIS, which plead a better 'cognizance of the evils of waging war' by the future US war planners.

Conclusion

Sun Tzu's theories on warfare did not find much traction in the US strategic thinking while waging the Afghan and Iraq campaigns, which led to disastrous outcomes as predicted in *The Art of War*. Despite useful tactical and operational discussion, Sun Tzu's enduring value remains in understanding "the moral, intellectual and circumstantial elements of war." The weakness in thoroughly studying the moral, intellectual and circumstantial elements of war, as perceived in *The Art of War*, led to the serious setbacks faced by the US in the fallout of Afghanistan and Iraq wars. The moral reaction of the invaded country's diverse populations, the intellectual dimensions of the full strategic spectrum and the circumstantial aspects of the political environment were not 'thoroughly studied.' The ethnic, sectarian and political diversity in Afghanistan and Iraq proved too complex to be of any strategic advantage. The anti-Taliban or the anti-Saddam sentiments which were perceived to be of instrumental 'moral' value in garnering public support for the US' military strategies in those regions proved ephemeral. The post-Taliban and post-Saddam strategic linkages of Afghan and Iraq politics in the wider Middle Eastern context could not be intellectually parsed and studied by the US war managers. The biggest failure in terms of Sun Tzu's advisory remained in misreading the circumstantial elements of war. As the circumstances evolved in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US war effort shuttled between regime change, institution building, decapitating leadership, counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism, and political negotiation. At times it simply bordered on frustration, evident in some of the strategies aimed to contain ISIS or Taliban resurgence. The US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were not envisioned as 'road to survival or ruin,' perhaps due to their expeditionary nature, ignoring the significance of 'harmony' created through 'correlating and contextualizing' the whole gamut of

⁴⁶ Ames, *Sun Tzu - The Art of Warfare*, 85.

strategy. In fact, Sun Tzu helps in understanding the significance of total strategy over total war, an all-time conceptual nugget for the strategist.

