Lessons for Israel from Ancient Chinese Military Thought: Facing Iranian Nuclearization with Sun-Tzu

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I first wrote about the modern applications of ancient Chinese military principles, as articulated specifically in Sun-Tzu’s classic, *The Art of War*, over ten years ago, and returned to the topic from time to time. At least one other author has developed this theory as it pertains specifically to U.S. strategy, as well. The time is right to revisit this conversation, and to integrate classical Greek notions of dialectical reasoning, which I have considered separately in the context of an “avant-garde” approach to decision making, and which makes increasing sense as a complement, indeed, a necessary component, of a strategic thought process inspired by Sun-Tzu.

For Israel, in particular, now already at the eleventh hour with respect to any remaining unilateral options for preemptive self-defense against a steadily-nuclearizing Iran, ancient principles could signify a possibly last opportunity to learn something genuinely indispensable. An examination of Sun-Tzu’s *The Art of War* should focus upon Israel’s nuclear deterrent, and on its corollary but routinely changing order of battle.

**Israel’s Defenses and Deterrence**

Israel’s national defense against aggression has never been solely vested in technological remedies. Instead, it has relied, from its national beginning in 1948, on assorted forms of deterrence, including nuclear deterrence. It is true, of course, that Israel has recently been placing an increasing emphasis on its ballistic missile defenses, especially the Arrow, or Hetz, programs. But, because any system of BMD could ultimately display unacceptable levels of “leakage,” the ultimate guarantor for national survival has steadfastly and more-or-less conspicuously remained the country’s (now still tacit, or undeclared) nuclear threat.

Ironically, as U.S. President Barack Obama pursues rapprochement with Iran’s new president, Hassan Rouhani, pressure will build upon Jerusalem to join the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (1968), and/or to enter into a “Nuclear Weapon Free-Zone.” If Israel denuclearizes, the deteriorating balance of power in the Middle East caused in part by the so-called “Arab Spring” and Iranian nuclearization – which I have described elsewhere in my writings and lectures as a correlation of forces issue – could fundamentally threaten the Jewish State.
If, as is likely, Israel’s comparative power vis-à-vis regional state and sub-state adversaries deteriorates further, security functions grounded in its nuclear threat will become progressively more important. There are at least seven such essential functions to be studied and borne in mind: (1) deterrence of large-scale conventional attacks by enemy-states; (2) deterrence of all levels of unconventional attack by enemy-states; (3) preemption of enemy-state nuclear attacks; (4) support of conventional preemptions against enemy-state nuclear assets; (5) support of conventional preemptions against enemy-state nonnuclear assets; (6) nuclear war-fighting; and (7) the so-called “Samson Option.” In making any preemption decisions, Israel would first of all need to determine whether expressions of “anticipatory self-defense” would be tactically or operationally cost-effective.

How does jurisprudence affect nuclear threat functions, primarily deterrence? Contrary to the generally prevailing conventional wisdom on law and geopolitics, nuclear deterrence, as well as its various associated forms of nuclear posture and infrastructure, do not necessarily function outside the authoritative expectations of international law. This is true even for preemption, insofar as a state could have the right to resort to anticipatory self-defense using even nuclear weapons if it’s leaders felt national survival was at stake, in accordance with a July 8, 1996 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice.

In the end, the ability of international law to prevent both nuclear and conventional war in the Middle East will depend upon far more than formal treaties, customs, and those general principles “recognized by civilized nations.” It will also be contingent, especially, upon the success or failure of individual countries’ military strategies in the region. This position was first explicitly codified at the landmark Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which recognized that national sovereignty, driven by self-interested states, created the greatest incentive for peace.

If Israel’s transforming nuclear strategy should serve to reduce the threat and/or seriousness of war, either because of its successful forms of nuclear deterrence, or even because of presumptively “no alternative” preemptive strikes launched against an illegally nuclearizing Iran, this strategy could then be “counted” as an authentic component or expression of international law enforcement. This is because we continue to live in a “Westphalian” system of international law, a system without any designated supranational authority or arbiter, and one in which the historic role of a balance-of-power must continue to assume at least a quasi-legal function.

**Shaping a New Strategic Posture with The Art of War**

How, then, should Israel proceed? Drawing upon Sun-Tzu, its leaders should consider the ancient Chinese strategist’s favored principles concerning diplomacy. Political initiatives and agreements may be useful, Sun-Tzu instructs, but, nonetheless, certain military preparations should never be neglected. Fusing power and diplomacy, says Sun-Tzu, the primary objective of every state should be to weaken enemy states without ever actually engaging in armed combat. In his classic work, this always overriding objective links the associated ideal of “complete victory,” in which an enemy may be subjugated by attacking its plans, to a controlled and reciprocal “strategy for planning offensives.”
Here is an example. Presently, in spite of an alleged rapprochement on nuclear issues between Iran and the United States, Israel’s Prime Minister Netanyahu remains prudently determined to maintain a suitable preemption option. In terms of diplomacy, the initial task must be to convince his Iranian counterparts that proceeding with nuclearization (now, apparently, proceeding via both enriched uranium and plutonium routes) could never be gainful.

To accomplish this important goal, Tehran must soon be made to realize that going beyond a certain point of nuclear no-return (a so-called “red line”) would assuredly prompt an Israeli preemption against pertinent hard-target infrastructures. In Chapter Four, “Military Disposition,” Sun-Tzu tell his readers: “One who cannot be victorious assumes a defensive posture; one who can be victorious attacks...Those who excel at defense bury themselves away below the lowest depths of Earth. Those who excel at offense move from above the greatest heights of Heaven.”

Even today, this advice may seem obvious enough. Yet, current Israel Defense Force strategic posture depends substantially upon various implemented forms of ballistic missile defense (BMD), especially the Arrow. By mistakenly placing too much hope in its active defense systems, particularly at a time when Arrow-3 programs are facing perilously reduced funding due to budget cuts, Israel could effectively be forced to disavow any remaining preemption options.

In consequence, Israel could have to plan to survive at the pleasure of its most recalcitrant enemies. Because placing too much faith in Arrow and related active defenses could place the country in needless existential peril, Jerusalem must always assure that it can maintain a recognizably secure and aptly robust second-strike or deterrent nuclear force. Taken together, a proper amalgam of efficient active defenses and wide-ranging strategic weapons would be necessary should Iran succeed in becoming fully nuclear. Sooner or later, therefore, having been permitted to develop weapons of mass destruction because both Israel and the United States had been burying themselves away “below the lowest depths of Earth,” certain of these enemy states could choose to attack. Plainly, the most conspicuous threat in this regard would be a now-nuclear Iran.

None of this is meant to suggest that Israel’s nuclear deterrence can remediate all conceivable existential threats. Israel’s advanced deterrent posture notwithstanding, there could still come a time when its implicit nuclear threat would be rendered powerless in a number of ways, even if it were dealing with an adversary that was reliably rational. Rationality, after all, would say nothing about the actual accuracy of the information used in that leadership’s rational calculations. Hence, altogether rational Iranian decision-makers might still make certain errors in calculation which would lead them to nuclear war.

Furthermore, some might argue the only response to an enemy who multiplies its stockpile of pertinent weapons, disperses those weapons across various platforms, and secures those weapons in hardened silos, is an after-the-fact retaliation. Inevitably, if this argument is correct, any such total reliance upon deterrence and active defenses could represent an existential (and potentially fatal) Israeli indifference to the enduring general principles of classic Chinese military strategy.

“Unorthodox” Strategies
Sun-Tzu’s repeated emphasis on the “unorthodox” can help Israel to compensate for any disproportionate reliance upon implicit nuclear deterrence and ballistic missile defense. This tricky but nuanced passage could represent a subtle tool for tactical implementation, one that might usefully exploit a particular enemy state’s identifiable matrix of military expectations.

As I’ve explained before, Israel should refine and develop “unorthodoxy” *before the battle*. To prevent the most dangerous forms of battle, those engagements which could become expressions of all-out unconventional warfare, Israel should examine and fashion a number of promising new military postures. These postures would focus more-or-less upon a reasoned shift from an image of “orthodox” rationality to one of “unorthodox” irrationality. This thinking may have played a decisive role back in October 1962, when U.S. President John F. Kennedy had threatened to board any Soviet ship that defied his “quarantine” of Cuba.

For now, as I have argued, every enemy of Israel can predict with considerable confidence, how Israel would initiate major military action, and also how it would respond to an armed attack or armed conflict initiated by others. If, however, Israel did not always signal such perfect rationality to its enemies – that is, if its actions (both defensive and offensive) were not always so utterly measured and predictable – it could plausibly enhance both its overall deterrence posture, and its capacity to carry out certain still-needed preemption options. This identical lesson applies to the United States, which is similarly mired in all-too-plainly predictable military policies and parameters.

**Unorthodoxy Revisited: The Samson Option**

The **“Samson Option”** is generally thought to reference a last-resort survival strategy, one wherein Israel’s nuclear weapons are used not for the prevention of war, or even for unavoidable war-waging, but simply as a “last spasm of vengeance.” Here, faced with an *End of the Third Temple* scenario, Israel’s leaders would have accepted that the Jewish State could no longer survive, but would insist, nonetheless, that it would consent to “die” only together with its pertinent enemies.

The view of the **Samson Option**, as I have predicted, from the Arab/Iranian side should be clear. Israel would resort to nuclear weapons only in reprisal, and only in response for overwhelmingly destructive first-strike attacks. Correspondingly, anything less than an overwhelmingly destructive enemy first-strike would elicit “merely” a measured and duly “proportionate” Israeli military response. Nonetheless, although it is always in Israel’s overall interest to avoid any actual resort to nuclear weapons use, there are certain identifiable circumstances in which nuclear war-fighting could become unavoidable, such as where an enemy first-strike against Israel does not destroy the Jewish State’s nuclear second-strike, or retaliatory nuclear capacity.

By striking first, an Iranian enemy would likely expect to have an advantage in controlling the metaphoric ladder of escalation, based on a presumed Iranian opinion that Israel would confine itself to limited reactions.

Israel could enhance its national security if it simultaneously reformulates its Samson Option and its policy of **nuclear ambiguity**. By selectively taking the bomb out of the “basement,” and by
indicating, simultaneously, that its nuclear weapons were not limited to Third Temple scenarios, Jerusalem would not be revealing the obvious – that is, that Israel merely has nuclear weapons – but rather Jerusalem would begin articulating that these particular weapons are distinctly usable, sufficiently invulnerable, and penetration-capable.

In essence, Jerusalem could update and incorporate Sun-Tzu’s timeless principles of war, in part by exhibiting a visible departure from perfect rationality; by displaying, in other words, the rationality of threatened irrationality.

To identify most efficiently the ways that Israel could make the “unorthodox” appear “orthodox,” Israel requires a pattern of thinking adapted historically not only by Sun-Tzu, but also by certain of his non-military contemporaries in ancient Greece. This pattern of thinking, a strategic “dialectic,” originates from an ancient Greek (Platonic) expression for the art of conversation. Adapted to a specifically Israeli military planning point of view, essential but non-exclusive components of a potentially useful strategic dialectic would include: (1) a method of refutation; (2) a method of repeated logical division of broad categories into their components; (3) logical reasoning that uses premises that are probable, or at least generally accepted; (4) formal logic; and (5) a logical development of thought via thesis and antithesis, oriented toward a purposeful synthesis of opposites. To codify a nuclear doctrine that Israel’s decisionmakers can apply to specific tactical and strategic questions, Israel’s leaders will need to engage in a “strategic dialectic,” asking and answering pertinent questions, again and again, and approaching their most urgent security problem as an interrelated series of thoughts, until core survival problems are confronted frontally.

Contained in this strategic dialectic, as Sun-Tzu was already deeply aware, is an unavoidable obligation to continue thinking. Logically, this imperative could never be met entirely, because of what the philosophers would call an “infinite regress problem,” but it must still be attempted. Armed with such an explicitly dialectical form of military strategy, moreover, Israel could focus not only upon assorted unique threats and situations (e.g., Iranian nuclear weapons development), but also upon various dynamic interactions between discrete threats, complex interactions known commonly as “synergies.”

As Israel considers the overlapping and varied threats it faces, insights from ancient Greece and Rome could usefully reinforce the instructive principles of Sun-Tzu, especially in regard to the lawfulness of any still-contemplated preemption against Iran. I am fond of Cicero’s explanation, as recalled by Hugo Grotius in his Commentary on the Law of Prize and Booty, that a justification for anticipatory self-defense exists “whenever he who chooses to hesitate will be obliged to pay an unjust penalty, before he can exact a just penalty… For, as Aelian says, citing Plato as his authority, any war (preemption) that is undertaken for the necessary repulsion of injury, is proclaimed not by a crier, nor by a herald, but by the voice of Nature herself.”

Grotius, of course, the proverbial “father of international law,” wrote these strong and unambiguous words in the seventeenth-century, long before any state had ever needed to consider its existential security from enemy nuclear attacks. Recalling Sun-Tzu, the French maxim, for the most part, has it right. Plus ça change...
Louis René Beres was educated at Princeton (Ph.D., 1971), and is the author of many books and articles dealing with nuclear strategy and nuclear war. In Israel, he was Chair of Project Daniel (PM Sharon, 2003). Professor Beres is a recent prior contributor to the Harvard National Security Journal.