

# Sun Tzu's Strategic Thought and Counterinsurgency in Nigeria: Issue and Theoretical Explanations

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## Abstract

The paper examined the synergy between Sun Tzu strategic thought with counterinsurgency in Nigeria. The paper is purely qualitative in approach and documentary sources were used to at least historically analyze available information of the issue discussed. The paper submitted though subject to criticism that Sun Tzu thought is a masterpiece in addressing the problem of insurgency in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Insurgency, Nigerian State, Terrorism, War and Intelligence

## 1.1 Introduction

Nigeria is a conflict prone nation with deep seated multiple crises. Domestic pressures, brought on by ethnic cleavages, overpopulation, poverty, mal-administration, environmental degradation, globalization, deteriorating social conditions, increasing fragility and decay of governmental institutions, especially those devoted to responding to the demands of the citizens, have resulted in violent inter-state conflicts. These have taken the form of civil wars, guerrilla wars, separatist movements, and ethnic violence over territory or government (Titus, 2016). However, in order to address these insecurity or insurgency, the state requires strategic measures to eliminate insurgency. This paper adopts *Sun Tzu's strategic thought* to discuss how it could be used to curtail insurgency in Nigeria.

Sun Tzu's theories on strategy are timeless in their utility to both military and civilian theorists. His theories, especially his concept of an indirect approach, are as relevant today as they were in C. 500 B. C, more so in the context of the renowned interest on international terrorism. For one, conflicts such as terrorism/insurgency require the innovative development of theories, which go beyond the past conventional strategies. As the emerging literature on combating terrorism points (Rice, 2006) "we must force ourselves to ways of defeating a new enemy, one that is generally unseen, is driven ideologically, does not seek a set battle, and is like no other faced before".

Sun Tzu is generally understood to be a Chinese General who lived over 2,400 years ago, at roughly the same time as Confucius. Raised in a family of army officers, Sun Tzu became familiar with, and eventually expert in military affairs. Historians are generally agreed that he led, and was successful in a number of military campaigns in the region currently known as the Anhui Province. His precise dates of birth and death are not known, but it is known that the state of Wu, under whose sovereign he served, became a dominant power at that time. Since then, it has become standard practice for Chinese military chiefs to familiarize themselves with Sun Tzu's writing (Wikipedia Source, 2015).

Sun Tzu treats war just as one of the many political instruments that political and national leaders can use in order to fulfill political aims. In Chinese philosophical traditions, emphasis on the minimum use of force and the advice of deploying arms only when necessary. Sun Tzu's "New Wars" thinking, a school of thought particularly committed in analyzing and understanding why the "old" strategic paradigm, based on conventional military superiority, doesn't work in civil war, counterinsurgency or against terrorism. According to Sun Tzu, contemporary conflicts are characterized by episodes of violent political mobilization promoted by "groups identified in terms of ethnicity, religion, or tribe".

For example, The Art of War has been described as a "revolutionary text" because it was the "first handbook that directly linked war making to the art of government". The different conception on the nature of war explained by Sun Tzu provides an approach which "emphasizes stratagem and manoeuvre over firepower and recognizes that the decisive battlefield lies in the political will of the opponent, the hearts and minds of its citizens." Indeed, Sun Tzu's ideal victory doesn't involve any military or epic battle but it is articulated in the main idea of neutralizing the enemy's strategy and avoiding the use of military forces.

Accordingly, Sun Tzu recommends setting this kind of strategy without any publicity; otherwise it would compel the enemy to respond. In this way, as McCready underlines, Sun Tzu "offers a way for weaker forces to defeat those more powerful" currently; international terrorist organizations are widely embedded in the concept of 'weaker forces' against powerful state actors as the US. Meilinger states that the influence and the legacy of the "old" paradigm, focused on "decisive battle and bloodshed, explained the failure of the US military mission in Iraq by deploying a large invasion force.

## 1.2 Sun Tzu's Strategic Thought

Sun Tzu's core assumptions are most easily described by organizing them into main themes: Fundamentals;

Command and Control; Important Strategies and Methods of Warfare; and Tactical Principles. These four themes address both a direct and an indirect method to warfare, but Sun Tzu stressed that defeating your enemy indirectly was the greatest virtue because it husbanded your resources while attacking your foes' central strengths. Three key fundamentals underlie Sun Tzu: one was that warfare was the greatest affair of state; the second stressed the criticality of accurate intelligence, analysis and planning; and the last focused on correctly setting strategic objectives and the methods to attain them. He believed that "the highest realization of warfare is to attack the enemy's plans; and the lowest is to attack their fortified cities". Whenever possible, victory should be achieved through diplomatic coercion, disrupting the enemy's alliances, thwarting plans, and frustrating its strategy.

The development of strategies and the methods of warfare comprise the third theme. Here, the ideas of deception, terrain, strategic power, and the use of indirect tactics stand out. Sun Tzu stressed that by selecting the most advantageous terrain, or conversely avoiding the poorest terrain, in conjunction with deceiving the enemy of your true intentions will cause the enemy to make fatal errors thus giving a commander the strategic and tactical advantage. The ideas of strategic and indirect power relate to the effective use of all elements of power that a state controls; including military, economic and diplomatic power, to influence the person's will and build alliances. Use of these powers alone or together in creative ways will give the commander the decisive advantage.

### 1.3 Sun Tzu and Intelligence

Throughout *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu emphasizes the importance of information. According to Sun Tzu, all warfare, on the strategic and the tactical level, is based on deception and surprise, and therefore on intelligence (Sun Tzu, 1986). Sun Tzu argues that continuous use of information about the enemy's strategy (political goal, possible alliances etc.) and tactical capacities (number and types of troops, war machinery, resources etc.) is the only effective way to exploit the enemy's weaknesses, and should therefore form the basis for all military planning (Sun Tzu, 1986). Critics have argued that Sun Tzu relies excessively on intelligence, thereby making surprise and deception a panacea (Handel, 2005). Plans that ensure victory require intelligence. Intelligence is about the enemy's strengths, weaknesses, troop dispositions, morale, resources of men and material, strategic reserves, etc. In other words, knowledge is power and thus denial of information or intelligence is also a power. The bulk of this power is to be exercised before battle is joined for it to lead to any meaningful success or victory. For Sun Tzu, the ideal victory is winning without fighting but using extensive deception, in order to convince the enemy's forces to yield. Additionally, it may be asked whether Sun Tzu's belief that reliable information is obtainable and can enable accurate forecasts (Handel, 2005) contradicts his idea of the infinite possible developments of war, which was outlined above.

However, the importance of intelligence in contemporary war should not be dismissed on these grounds. Intelligence, surprise and deception do play an important role in modern warfare. During the Persian Gulf War, for example, Saddam Hussein's loss of air reconnaissance allowed the US and its allies to successfully conduct deception tactics, which, in addition to the overall supremacy of the US Army, played a role in the swift defeat of the Iranian military forces (Finlan, 2003).

Another insight provided by Sun Tzu's thought on intelligence in regard to understanding contemporary war is more vague and indirect. Sun Tzu was aware of the fact that intelligence and information accumulation was a highly complex and difficult task. The chapter on the Use of Spies, where Sun Tzu writes about deception, counter-deception and the counter-measures corresponding to counter-deception, clearly reflects this complexity. When one takes into account Sun Tzu's empirical world, his thoughts on the complexity of information gathering can be seen in a more insightful light. Sun Tzu's political world consisted of mainly two actors: Emperors of Chinese states, and barbarian rulers (Kane, 2007). The chapter on tactics indicates that the vast majority of direct military confrontation took place on the battlefield (Sun Tzu, 1986). This is in contrast to the complexity of contemporary conflicts.

However, conflicts today often include a great variety of actors, all with different kinds of motives and strategies (states, warlords, terrorists, security firms, criminal organizations etc.), as well as different kinds of warfare (conventional tactics, guerilla warfare, terrorist attacks etc.). Thus one must assume that the realization of adequate information is very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Therefore, Sun Tzu's idea of complexity of information can help to explain why strong states misjudge certain situations and underestimate the political and military capacities of non-state actors, consequently applying inept strategies, which cause them to lose asymmetrical conflicts.

To this end, the role of intelligence as a strategy, Hendel asserts that "Sun Tzu's generals rely heavily on the work of spies and agents in order to secure victory with the least possible expenses and bloodshed", suggesting that this aspect of warfare is one the most significant even for assuring an effective deception. As a matter of fact, Sun Tzu wrote an entire chapter about 'Using Spies', in which he listed five different kinds of them (local, inward, converted, doomed and surviving spies) and described their most important tasks and aims,

such as gaining the deepest and the widest knowledge of the enemy.

Similarly, Al-Qaeda has created “a highly sophisticated network of spies and human intelligence-gathering sources throughout the world”. Such a system impressively resembles to the one suggested by Sun Tzu given that, as Gunaratna reports, it is comprised of three different levels of spies: “two tiers of agents who manage agents outside Afghanistan and in the regional nodes. They also cultivate subagents whose primary responsibility is penetrating and infiltrating Muslim migrant communities to recruit, gather intelligence and conduct operations.”

As a matter of fact, International Terrorist Association (ITA) like Al-Qaeda employs three conceptual pillars which characterize the thought of warfare proposed by Sun Tzu: deception, psychological considerations and the role of intelligence. Deception and psychological factors are the heart of warfare because they allow manipulating the enemy’s perceptions. Indeed, Sun Tzu perfectly knew that enemies convinced of their superiority in terms of capabilities or military resources weren’t attentive to the possibility of being misled. In the same way, Al-Qaeda might appear weak or not well-organized but being an international network with links in 55 countries and having training camps in many of them, its organizational structure is “such that deception, misdirection, secrecy and compartmentalization are heightened” and exploited extensively and successfully. In addition, psychological warfare is the direct consequence of deception: attacking enemy soldiers and their related citizens through indirect methods is the best way to destroy their morale and create tension inside society. Al-Qaeda’s tactics are in line with Sun Tzu’s recommendation, its main objective is spreading fear striking target’s societies through bombing, hijacking, kidnapping, assassinations and suicide attacks. Doing so, Al-Qaeda aims to undermine the overall support for the war effort, the sense of security among citizens and, moreover, it is successful in avoiding an open and unbalanced combat with the US.

#### **1.4 Relevance of Sun Tzu on Counterinsurgency in Nigeria**

Deception and winning without fighting is the best skill. Sun Tzu has become the intellectual father of a school of warfare that advocates winning by maneuver or by psychologically dislocating the opponent. For example, Sun Tzu advocates attacking portions of the enemy with your whole force: “If I am able to determine the enemy’s dispositions while at the same time I conceal my own, then I can concentrate and he must divide. And if I concentrate while he divides, I can use my entire strength to attack a fraction of his”.

Sun Tzu’s war fighting maxims span a wide range of strategic, operational, and tactical theories. From this list emerge several strategic underlying themes – attacking the enemy’s strategy, knowledge of indirect approach, shaping the enemy, man’s role as the decisive factor in war, and the application of intelligence gathering activities. All these submissions have been adopted in 20th century warfare, and elaborated upon by modern thinkers in strategy decision making.

From the foregoing, the framework of analysis is a masterpiece in understanding the *modus operandi* of the insurgents from its structures and its influence on Nigerian state. The insurgency is more of terrorism in its tactics, which is not different from other major wars that occur in the history of mankind.

However, for Nigerian state to deal with the situation there is need to adopt Sun Tzu strategy of not using much of military operations without thorough preparation rather diplomacy and deception as means to conquer the enemy. Sun Tzu treats war (insurgency) just as one of the many political instruments that political and national leaders can use in order to fulfill political aims. For example, the insurgency is good example of the political tool used by people to perpetrate their political motives; hence if the government is to overcome this, the counterinsurgency strategy of Sun Tzu is useful through negotiation and diplomatic strategy to curtail the upsurge of insurgency in the country.

On intelligence, the theory explains in details that, intelligence and information is very central for every counterinsurgency because it gives the security apparatus accurate information about the enemy (insurgents) and the success or otherwise is determined by the level of information disseminated.

To this effect, in warfare, first lay plans which will ensure victory, and then lead your army to battle; if you will not begin with stratagem but rely on brute strength alone, victory will no longer be assured." As a matter of fact, this theoretical framework can be successfully applied to analyze the war on insurgency in Nigeria.

Indeed, studying The Art of War can be a very efficient way to understand insurgency in Nigeria, which represents “a model of Sun Tzu’s principles on indirect warfare”. However, to be more realistically, the defeat of insurgency is not entirely possible. This is because of structural injustice and failure of government to address the issue of unemployment, education and ethnic cleavages. In order to comply with the so-called ‘second paradox of Sun Tzu’ (obtaining success by preserving the enemy from total destruction), it should be noted that, “the object of war cannot be total security” but “a better kind of insecurity”. As for the case of insurgency it means living Nigeria state without attempting to overthrow their political regimes, because the most dangerous peril would be to transform the war on insurgency into a war against Islam and resource control.

However, it is not wrong to argue here that Sun Tzu’s assertion that a skillful strategist should be able to subdue the enemy’s army without engaging it is confusing if taken out of context. Sun Tzu was likely

referring to deterrence followed by some brilliant manoeuvring on any of the political, moral or economic fronts to prevent unnecessary military conflict. An example of the North – South Vietnamese conflict suffices: The communists could possibly have achieved the same ultimate objective by other means. One obvious example might be to sustain time-consuming guerrilla tactics, while using perceived diplomatic ties with China as negotiating leverage with the United States.

Again, his strategic thought did incomplete analyses and thus provided advice that might be wrong depending on the circumstances. For example, Sun Tzu said, “To be certain to take what you attack is to attack a place the enemy does not protect”. It is easy to use that quote as an advocacy “indirect approach”. That is, attack where the enemy does not expect. The problem is that there is almost always a reason why the enemy does not defend a place, and it usually has to do with the limited value of that place. For example, the case of Niger delta region of Nigeria, the insurgents may likely concentrate at sensitive terrain where the target resources are located and also the insurgent in the northeast protecting only sambisa forest for their interest.

### 1.5 Conclusion

Despite the recent military actions in the northeast which supposed to have been defeated, as the recurrent news about failed or successful terrorist attacks show us. As a new form of threat which requires a modern strategy to be faced, counter-insurgency can be the new security issue in which Sun Tzu’s masterpieces can find a pragmatic application. In this case he helps us to understand what terrorism is and how it works on tactical and operational levels. At the same time, the work of Sun Tzu analyzed counterinsurgency, but focusing more on intelligence and deception as the core concepts of every war. Sun Tzu devotes attention to strategies preceding the actual fighting, ranging from military preparations to diplomatic actions (Handel, 2005). For Sun Tzu, strategic superiority will result in tactical success (Sun Tzu, 1986). A strong diplomatic strategy and a well-functioning economy, points emphasized by Sun Tzu, are of course of central importance in winning a war. This is especially true nowadays, where scientific advancements and technological innovations, as well as the production and distribution of aliment, fuel, and weapons, are just as important as tactical battlefield success for winning a war (Handel, 2005 ). Regarding this more comprehensive level of analysis, the thinking of Sun Tzu is indeed more relevant to contemporary war.

Sun Tzu’s numeric superiority thinking was extremely apparent in China’s strategy during the Korean War (1950-53), where tactical success was supposed to be generated by simply outnumbering the US-led UN troops (Freedmann, 2001). In addition, this type of strategy characterized the post-World War II strategy of the USSR. The Soviets drastically outnumbered NATO troops in regard to conventional war machinery. This situation influenced President Eisenhower’s decision to “abandon the attempt to compete in conventional strength and capitalize instead on the growing nuclear arsenal of the United States” (Freedmann, 2001). It is evident that Sun Tzu’s thoughts can help to explain some of the strategic military constellations of the modern age.

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