

Sun Tzu to Giáp: masters of strategy and their contemporary relevance

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David Leece presents a brief summary of the career, seminal writings and main ideas of each of eight historic masters of strategy and then discusses their contemporary relevance. He concludes that, despite massive advances in technology, each of the masters still has lessons for the 21st century strategist.

Key words: Sun Tzu; Machiavelli; Clausewitz; Jomini; Mahan; Liddell Hart; Douhet; Giáp.

It is timely at the start of the Institute's 2017 lecture programme to refresh our memories of the masters of strategy. Our guest lecturers frequently mention one or more of them in passing and they assume that most in the audience will be familiar with the person mentioned. Accordingly, I will now speak about eight of the strategists who are more commonly referred to in our lectures. For each, I will present a brief summary of his career, seminal writings and main strategic ideas. I will then discuss their contemporary relevance. But first, we need to make sure we are using common terminology.

Definitions

There are two terms that I wish to define, strategy and tactics.

Strategy traditionally has been considered to be generalship, the art of war. Today, it is usually considered to encompass the art and science of employing political, economic, psychological and military forces as necessary during peace and war to secure national objectives. A distinction is frequently drawn between 'grand' strategy and 'military' strategy.

- **Grand strategy** is the art of applying the whole of the national power in the most effective way to attain the national objective. It includes the use of diplomacy and economic pressure, conclusion of suitable arrangements with allies, the mobilisation of national industry and the distribution of the manpower available, as well as the employment of the three fighting services in combination. Where the grand strategy relies primarily on the use or threatened use of military force, it is referred to as a direct strategy. Where the grand strategy relies primarily on non-military methods, it is referred to as an indirect strategy.

- **Military strategy** is the art and science of employing the armed forces of a nation to secure the objects of national policy by the application of force or the threat of force.

Tactics on the other hand is the art and science of employing armed forces in contact with the enemy – the battle plan. So, while tactics focuses on the use of armed forces in engagements, military strategy focuses on the use of engagements or the threat of using them to attain the object of the war.²



Sun Tzu

Sun Tzu (544 – 496 BC)

We will begin our overview of the masters of strategy by considering Sun Tzu. Sun Tzu was a 6th century BC Chinese general, strategist and philosopher. His seminal work, *The Art of War*, is a classic strategic text which remains widely influential in both Eastern and Western thought today (Sun Tzu 1963). Its concepts, while directed to the conduct of warfare, apply also to conflict in general, from inter-personal to international, and the book is used as a text in politics and commerce as much as it is by military staff colleges.

The 2500-year-old book's central tenet is: "*To win without fighting is best*". Its chapters cover among other things: strategic assessments, doing battle, planning a siege, armed struggle, adaptations, manoeuvring armies, terrain, fire attack, and the use of spies. Other oft-quoted tenets include:

"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle."

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²For a concise description of strategic terms as commonly used in Australia, see Australian Army (1977).

"All warfare is based on deception. There is no place where espionage is not used. Offer the enemy bait to lure him."

"... to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting."

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469 – 1527)

While Sun Tzu was a military strategist, Niccolò Machiavelli was a grand strategist and a master of diplomacy and political intrigue in late 15th and early 16th century Florence. He became a senior civil servant in the Florentine Republic in 1498 and subsequently undertook diplomatic missions to France and the Holy Roman Emperor; he accompanied Pope Julius II on his first military campaign; and he organized an infantry force to participate in the capture of Pisa in 1509. After his force was defeated in 1512, he was imprisoned and tortured by the Medici who ruled Florence. After his release, he became a writer of strategy. His seminal work, *The Prince*, written for Lorenzo de' Medici, was published in 1513 (Machiavelli 2003). His tough-minded and pragmatic approach to realpolitik, advocacy of ruthless tactics for gaining absolute power, and abandonment of conventional morality, shocked Europe, but his tenets retain relevancy today as human nature changes little.



Niccolò Machiavelli

Carl von Clausewitz (1780 – 1831) and Antoine-Henri Jomini (1779 – 1869)

Strategy did not become an area of rigorous intellectual inquiry until the late 18th century. Following the earlier lead of scientists who had derived scientific laws from which generalisations could be made, two German military thinkers, von Bulow and von Berenhorst, in the 1790s began applying a similar approach to the study of warfare. After Napoleon's successes around the turn of the century, their work was taken up by a Prussian, Carl von Clausewitz, and a Swiss, Antoine-Henri Jomini. Clausewitz was a Prussian general and military theorist. Jomini was a Swiss army officer who became a French and later Russian general.

Clausewitz and Jomini were contemporaries and they engaged in debate via



Carl von Clausewitz



Antoine-Henri Jomini

correspondence, but Clausewitz's seminal work, *Vom Kriege* ("On War"), was not published until after his death in 1831 (Clausewitz 1873). Clausewitz considered that the true aim in war was the destruction of the enemy's main forces on the battlefield by the direct application of massive force at the point of decisive battle. Today, this is referred to as the military strategy of the direct approach. Clausewitz noted that Napoleon was able to plan the use of his army in a far-reaching, fast moving fashion, exploiting morale and willpower to achieve decisive results. He considered that Napoleon's success lay in his maintaining consistency between the political and military aims and his insights into the weaknesses of his enemies. Two of Clausewitz's oft quoted tenets are:

"War is not an independent phenomenon, but the continuation of politics by different means."

"Pursue one great decisive aim with force and determination."

Clausewitz's approach was a too conceptual for Jomini who considered that there were principles of war, analogous to scientific laws, that could be derived from Napoleon's campaigns. He undertook a comparative study of the successes and failures of Frederick the Great of Prussia and Napoleon (Jomini 1862; 1865). From these studies, he formulated principles of war, such as the need to put superior combat power at the decisive point; and he identified the value of interior lines in enabling one to do so. By this he meant that if you are a country being attacked from two sides simultaneously, you have an advantage over your enemies in that you can re-deploy your forces and your logistic support from one side of the country to the other using internal lines of communication so as to achieve superior combat power at the decisive point. In contrast, your opponent has to move his resources to the decisive point via much longer external lines of communication.

Partly due to Clausewitz's early death, but also because Clausewitz published in German whereas Jomini published in French, the international *lingua franca* of the time, Jomini became the more influential strategist in the 19th century. Jomini was especially influential in the staff colleges of Europe and the United States and it is via this route that we have inherited the concept of principles of war as the essence of military strategy, principles such as: selection and maintenance of the aim; concentration of force; co-operation; economy of effort; security; surprise; flexibility; administration; and maintenance of morale.

In the 20th century, however, warfare became more politically charged, especially during and after World War II. Hence, Clausewitz's teachings with their emphasis on aligning the political and military aims have become the more influential in recent times and less is heard of Jomini, but his views on military strategy remain important.

Technology

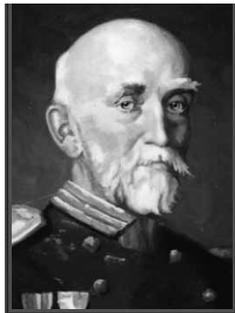
While rigorous intellectual inquiry had led to major advances in strategic thought in the early 19th century, the Industrial Revolution led to rapid development of technology later in the century and in the early 20th century. These technological developments became the major drivers of strategic development leading into World War I and beyond. They included:

- the railway and later the motor vehicle, which revolutionized the land transport of personnel and military matériel;
- the telegraph and later the wireless, which revolutionised communications;
- advances in weaponry, especially the development of long-range, more accurate artillery, the machine-gun and the tank, which together ushered in industrial-age warfare on the land battlefield and the eventual demise of the cavalry;
- the introduction of steam-propelled steel-hulled ships equipped with long-range naval guns, and then the battleship, the submarine and eventually the aircraft carrier, all of which changed the nature of naval warfare and the sea transport of personnel and matériel; and finally
- the development of aircraft which led to the air becoming a new domain of warfare.

As the sea, the land and later the air became recognised as separate domains of warfare, new schools of sea, land and air warfare emerged. We will now consider the champions of sea power, land power and air power, starting with Alfred Thayer Mahan, whom I have chosen as the champion of sea power.

Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840 – 1914)

Alfred Thayer Mahan was a United States naval officer and historian who taught at the Naval War College (Newport, Rhode Island). As a naval historian, he studied the successes of Britain's Royal Navy in the century leading up to the Napoleonic wars and from this study he developed a doctrine of command of the sea via the capital ship and the fleet-in-being. He published many books. Of them his seminal works were *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (Mahan 1890); and *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793–1812* (Mahan 1892).



Alfred Thayer Mahan

Thayer's analyses showed that national sea-power was based on six factors:

- the nation's geographic location and proximity to the sea;
- its physical configuration in terms of length of coastline and availability of good harbours;

- the extent of its territory, including the availability of gulfs, bays and large river systems which could be easily penetrated by an enemy naval force, and its population size and density and hence ability to protect its territory;
- the character of the government, especially its understanding of the nature of sea-power and willingness to use it;
- the size and character of the population – a sea-power needs a substantial population of which a substantial proportion is engaged in maritime pursuits in peacetime; and
- national character and attitudes – unless a nation has many people engaged in international commerce and shipping, its potential for development of sea-power is extremely low.

Other key themes to emerge from Mahan's research were:

- the value of central position, which in naval strategy is analogous to Jomini's interior lines, as it enables rapid re-deployment of forces from one ocean or sea to another;
- the criticality of choke points, such as straits (*e.g.* Gibraltar) and major canals (*e.g.* Suez, Panama);
- the need to control maritime lines of communication;
- the use of the blockade; and
- the decisive battle.

Mahan's work underpinned the development of United States sea-power in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

Mahan's work also was reflected in the Britain's and Germany's Great War naval strategies – Britain's blockade of the German high seas fleet in Heligoland Bight at the mouth of the Elbe and Weser Rivers and in the Baltic at the Skagerrak choke point; Jutland, the decisive battle between the German and British grand fleets, which resulted in Germany failing to break the blockade; and Germany's development of submarine warfare to sever Britain's maritime lines of communication, especially across the Atlantic.

Mahan's concepts have contemporary relevance to Australia, a potential sea-power. Australia is located centrally between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, south of an archipelago with several strategic choke points. Australia also is dependent for most of its trade on maritime lines of communication which traverse the world's oceans. But as a potential sea-power, we have several of the Mahan's weaknesses – in the areas of government and national character and population distribution.

B. H. Liddell Hart (1895 – 1970)

As the champion of land power, I have chosen Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart who is better known as Captain B. H. Liddell Hart. Liddell Hart was a British professional soldier who served as an officer in the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in the early years of

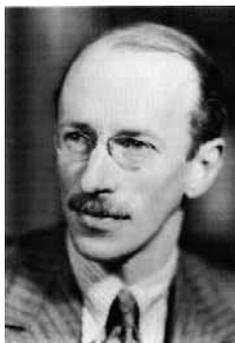
the Great War, but was wounded and severely gassed on the Somme in July 1916. He never properly recovered and after the war he was medically discharged. He became a military historian and strategic theorist.

He had been so traumatised by his war experiences that he researched ways to avoid another war in Europe in which attrition would be the dominant strategy. He was a prolific author. His best-known work is *The Strategy of the Indirect Approach* (Liddell Hart 1941). Whereas Clausewitz's direct approach calls for use of overwhelming military force at the decisive point to destroy the enemy's main forces, Liddell Hart's concept is not to seek decisive battle until the enemy has been thrown off balance or dislocated. Concentration at the decisive point then becomes vital and the line of effort is best directed to the line of least resistance. The indirect approach is particularly suited to small armies likely to be facing an enemy of superior strength.

But Liddell Hart's land-power legacy is arguably equally in his contribution to the direct approach. He was strongly influenced by the success of the tank in the later stages of the Great War, especially the employment of it in 1918 in all-arms actions as at Le Hamel, Amiens and in the final One Hundred Days Offensive (Liddell Hart 1933). Opposed to the frontal assault, he favoured mobile armoured warfare. In this, he differed from his British contemporary, Major-General J. F. C. Fuller, who favoured tank-on-tank engagements. Rather, Liddell Hart favoured all-arms columns, led by tanks, but supported by 'tank marines' (infantry mounted on tanks – which evolved to mechanised infantry) and self-propelled artillery, and accompanied by close air support.

He formulated these concepts between the wars and they were implemented, not by the British, but by the Germans in World War II, who referred to the strategy as 'blitzkrieg' (lightning war). Blitzkrieg was intended to bring about swift victory, while limiting casualties and expenditure of ammunition. Whether the Germans adopted Liddell Hart's teachings or independently arrived at the same strategy by trial and error is debated. After the war, General H. W. Guderian, the successful German panzer commander in France and Poland, seemed equivocal on this point.

Whether or not Liddell Hart was a major influence on the Germans' adoption of blitzkrieg, he was the person who best articulated the concept as a strategic theory and he did so ahead of it being validated in World War II. During the subsequent Cold War, it was adopted as the land strategy by both NATO and the Soviets; and the Americans subsequently employed it the opening phases of both the first (1991) and second



B. H. Liddell Hart

(2003) Gulf Wars, although they called it 'shock and awe'.

Giulio Douhet (1869 – 1930)

As the champion of air power, I have chosen Giulio Douhet. Douhet was an Italian army general during the Great War. Like Liddell Hart, he became disillusioned with trench warfare. He was impressed by the German long-range heavy bomber raids on England in 1917. He wrote to the Italian war minister proposing the breaking the stalemate on the Austrian front by launching attacks on Austrian cities with a fleet of 500 bombers. For bypassing his superiors, he was court-martialled and imprisoned, but was exonerated after the war.



Giulio Douhet

He published his seminal work, *The Command of the Air*, in 1921 (Douhet 1942). It was a visionary conceptualisation of the potential power of massed strategic bombing. In it Douhet argued that air power operates in a third dimension (what we would call today a third domain) in which planes could manoeuvre very fast with a flexibility and freedom not possible on land or sea. Strategic bombing of an enemy nation, using high-explosive, incendiary and gas bombs, would have both a destructive physical effect and also a terror effect if it were to target population centres as well as ports, heavy industry, critical transportation infrastructure and the like. Future wars potentially could be won by air power alone. An air force should be a separate arm, not simply an adjunct of an army or navy. Indeed, the air arm would be the dominant arm in future wars.

A second edition of his book was published in 1927. After his death in 1930, it was translated into most European languages and in the 1930s it became a major influence on the doctrine of European air-forces and contributed to public apprehension about aerial bombing in the lead-up to World War II.

Not surprisingly, Douhet's theories were put to the test in World War II, first by Germany in the Battle of Britain (1940) and then by Britain and the United States in the bombing of Germany (1943 – 1945). Despite doing great damage, neither campaign proved strategically decisive in the way Douhet had envisaged – not even the fire-bombing of Dresden in February 1945 broke the German people's will. Rather than becoming witless from panic when bombed, the morale of civilian populations seemed to rise and national cohesion increased. The United States also tested the theory in North Vietnam in the 1960s and early 1970s, with similar results and again without strategic success. Today, most strategists view strategic bombing as but one of a range of tools at their disposal.

Võ Nguyên Giáp (1911 – 2013)

World War II ended with the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan. The culmination of a strategic bombing campaign, they became 'the straws which broke the camel's back' for Japan. The Cold War followed shortly thereafter. As its major belligerents, the Soviet Union and the United States, each possessed nuclear weapons, general warfare between them was out of the question because it would result in 'mutually assured destruction' (MAD). This led to several decades in which, in lieu of general war, limited war was fought via proxies in Korea, Vietnam, the Middle East and other 'third-world' countries. In this context, Võ Nguyên Giáp proved to be the master of the limited war.



Võ Nguyên Giáp

Võ Nguyên Giáp was a Vietnamese nationalist, general, politician and strategist. After the defeat and departure of the Japanese at the end of World War II, the French returned to Indochina as the imperial power. The Vietnamese nationalists had only a small, dispersed force of communist guerrillas to oppose the French. Giáp slowly moulded this force into a formidable guerrilla army which harassed the French using guerrilla tactics for some eight years. Once he had built his strength and he judged the time was right, Giáp lured the French into a decisive battle on ground of his choosing, a battle in which he won a decisive victory. Only 4 per cent of the French Army was defeated at Dien Bien Phu, but it destroyed the morale of the French people; the French government fell and its successor ended French occupation of Indochina.

The 1954 Geneva Accords split Vietnam into a Viet Minh-governed northern state, which was supported by the Soviet Union and China, and a non-communist-governed southern state, which was supported by the United States. Giáp planned and conducted a campaign against the southern government and their American sponsors with the aim of ejecting the foreigners and reunifying the nation under the Viet Minh government. It took a lot longer than the war against the French, some two decades. It again involved the building of a guerrilla army throughout the country and guerrilla warfare interspersed with decisive battles at key stages. One such battle, the Tet Offensive of 1968, while a tactical defeat for the communists was also a strategic victory for them, because the American people lost the will to continue the fight and the process of handing the fighting over to the South Vietnamese began. After the hand-over was complete in 1973, North Vietnam began waging a more conventional war against the southern government. It launched a major offensive in 1975 which resulted in the capture of Saigon, the southern capital, the fall of

the Saigon government and the reunification of Vietnam under a communist government.

Võ Nguyên Giáp was a prolific writer and a collection of his writings was published in 1970 under the title *The Military Art of People's War* (Giáp 1970). Today, Giáp is widely recognised as a strategic expert on limited war, in both the guerrilla and the decisive battle phases. He is also credited as the brains behind the defeat of both the French and the Americans in Indochina.

Discussion

Since the Vietnam War the nature of warfare has again been changed by the introduction of new technologies, such as: intercontinental ballistic missiles and cruise missiles; precision-guided munitions; global-orbiting space satellites used for communications, surveillance, navigation (global positioning) and the like; remotely-piloted aircraft (drones), robots on land; remotely-piloted ships and submarines; the internet and social media, which can be used for military and intelligence purposes as well as legitimate and illegal civilian ones; communications that allow the supreme commander to speak direct to individual soldiers while in combat in real time; and numerous others. Importantly, space is now recognised as a warfare domain in its own right and cyberspace is effectively a fifth domain now.

Given these developments, it is reasonable to question the contemporary relevance of the strategic ideas of yesteryear. I contend that Sun Tzu, Machiavelli and Clausewitz, each of whom addressed the politico-military interface pragmatically, retain their relevance because human nature and the nature of conflict have not changed down the ages.

Jomini and his principles of war also remain relevant because the principles are independent of, and not affected by, technological innovations. Indeed, the principles of war remain the essence of military strategy.

Mahan, the champion of sea power, still has much to teach a nation like Australia which until recently purported to base its defence on a maritime strategy (Parliament 2004). The government's 2016 Defence white paper (Defence 2016), however, does not refer to this strategy, nor does it acknowledge what Mahan would see as our weaknesses such lack of a merchant navy, a country sparsely-populated in critical areas, poorly-developed interior lines of communication and the like. We have a fleet base in both the east and the west, but only one fleet, not two; and a vast maritime trade which traverses the world's oceans in foreign ships from and to ports that could be easily blockaded and via chokepoints that also could be readily blocked. We need a better-defined maritime strategy and it should be informed by Mahan's teachings.

Liddell Hart has much to teach us about employing the military strategy of the indirect approach which is

particularly relevant to a nation with a small army. His blitzkrieg warfare concepts, however, while they can be combined with an indirect approach, may be less relevant to land warfare in our neighbourhood, but would have application in the unlikely event of a limited conventional war on the Australian mainland. For our neighbourhood, though, amphibious strategies are more relevant.

Air-power advocates still hanker after Douhet's ideas. In its most recent bulletin, Australia's Air Power Development Centre seems to be suggesting that Australia's defence needs can be met by a powerful air force supported only by Special Forces for targeted employment against strategic targets on land – there is no need for an army to occupy territory and no mention is made of a navy (Air Power Development Centre 2016). I consider this to be fallacious. A strategic strike capability, delivered by suitable platforms which could be satellites, aircraft, missile artillery, surface ships and/or submarines, certainly must be an important part of our defence and deterrence capability. But we also need to be able to defend our critical infrastructure, protect our population centres and our maritime and air lines of communication, and undertake peacekeeping and disaster relief tasks, among many other requirements. These definitely require an army and a navy as part of the defence force. Strategic air power is but one part of the mix.

Finally, if we are to understand limited and asymmetric warfare and be able to deal with terrorism, guerrillas and revolutionary warfare, then we need to take heed of Giáp's teachings. Giáp was not interested in military success for its own sake. He used it to destroy the enemy nation's will to fight and drew out the guerrilla phase for as long as that took. So, at the grand strategic level, before committing to a revolutionary war abroad, our political leaders need to fully grasp its likely political and psychological effects at home. They should not become involved unless they are willing to commit to a very long campaign of counter-revolutionary warfare. A sensible grand strategist normally would recommend against it.

Conclusion

The masters of strategy have shown that valuable strategic lessons can be drawn from a study of military history. Great skill, however, is required to identify relevant lessons and draw sound conclusions from them. To master these skills, one needs to read about strategy, think rigorously about it, write about it and discuss it with peers. Our Special Interest Group on Strategy provides an opportunity for you to do this.

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³Further reading: A Masters of Strategy reading list is available at www.rusinsw.org.au and go to 'Library'.