

The Art of Diplomacy in *The Art of War*

Simon Szykman

Introduction

The *Art of War* was written about 2,500 years ago in China by Sun Tzu. It is not one of the most famous books ever written -- the average person has probably never heard of it (though probably many Diplomacy players have). But it is one of the most famous military treatises written because it is the oldest surviving one and quite possibly the first one ever written.

In my opinion, a good player of the game of Diplomacy must not only be a good diplomat, but a good strategist. I also believe that a successful military leader (in the *real* world) must be not only a good strategist, but a good diplomat as well. Because I see the two as being strongly enmeshed, when I heard about Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, I was very interested in reading it to see if I could find principles that apply to the game of Diplomacy in a 2,500 year old document.

The *Art of War* is divided into thirteen chapters. Because Diplomacy is limited in scope, some of the chapters such as *Terrain* and *The Attack by Fire* do not apply (though they still make for fascinating reading). Others are very relevant. It is these that I will focus on and add some of my own thoughts to. I welcome any comments or stories of situations where the applying (or not applying) the principles discussed below have affected the course of a game you played in. These will appear in next issue's Pouch Deposits, or if I get enough of them I'll print them up in a followup column in the next issue.

Sun Tzu was unknown by his contemporaries until after he wrote the *Art of War*. The treatise brought him to the notice of King Ho Lu, who appointed him as a general, and his military genius led to his becoming a legendary figure. Sun Tzu was not giving advice to strategy game enthusiasts, he was fighting wars in ancient China. Yet many of the strategies that we Diplomacy players have discovered and rediscovered, on our own or from watching and listening to other players, are by no means novel.

2,500 years ago, these principles were novel. War was more or less a disorganized free-for-all, and as far as is known, organized principles of military strategy did not exist (at least in written form) until *The Art of War*. It is said that Sun Tzu, commanding an army of 30,000 men, defeated an army of 200,000. Had Sun Tzu's opponent known of those principles, or had a similar set of principles of his own, the outcome would most likely have been different.

Many of the points that I focus in on may seem obvious. While the novice Diplomacy player may come away from this article with some knowledge that will improve play, many players will not. If you are looking to improve your game and are not a novice, this article probably won't be of much help. I found it interesting that I could read principles of military tactics that were put to paper (parchment?) two and a half millennia ago, and find familiarity in them. If you do as well, please read on.

The Art of War

In the *Art of War*, Sun Tzu says:

The art of war is of vital importance to the State.

Perhaps this is self-evident. He also says:

The general that hearkens to my counsel and acts upon it, will conquer... The general that hearkens not to my counsel nor acts upon it, will suffer defeat.

What he's really saying with these two statements is "you've got a really important problem, and I'm the one who can tell you exactly what to do about it". Pretty bold words considering he wasn't appointed as a general until after he wrote the *Art of War*.

In a chapter called *Laying Plans*, Sun Tzu says:

According as circumstances are favorable, one should modify one's plans.

This is really one of the key points to being a good Diplomacy player: flexibility. It doesn't mean one should play haphazardly. Rather, it means you shouldn't stick to a plan to the point where it interferes with your play; don't exclude potential opportunities to improve your situation purely because it would mean changing your plan. Of course, changing your plan may have other costs which need to be taken into account.

I used to have a problem with this. I would make a strong commitment to an alliance and receive one in return. I would then abandon the border with that ally to use my units to attack somebody else. As you would expect, I got stabbed. Twice (in two games). By the same person - Mike Frigge. How does that saying go "stab me once, shame on you, stab me twice, shame on me"?

I have since learned better. Mike already knew better. He didn't make the alliances with the specific intention of stabbing me, but when I left him a with an undefended or under defended border, he changed his plan and attacked me. The obvious lesson I learned from those games was not to leave borders open, even with allies. But the meta-lesson, and the more important one, is to remain flexible and always be willing to shift tracks if you have something to gain from it.

Sun Tzu also had the following to say:

All warfare is based on deception Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; Hold out baits to entice the enemy. Feign disorder, and crush him. If he is secure at all points, be prepared for him. If he is in superior strength, evade him. If your opponent is of choleric temper, seek to irritate him. Attack him where is is unprepared, appear when you are not expected.

This is one of the key distinctions between Diplomacy and other strategy games. In many games it is to one's advantage to hide one's intentions, or even to distract an opponent's attention from what is really going on, but only in Diplomacy are trickery and deception key tactics used actively and offensively to get what you want. The game of Diplomacy requires skill not just in negotiating peace or a plan for attack with player A on player B. You need to be able to mislead others, let them think you are doing one thing when you are doing another. A good Diplomacy player can get another player to do things his way. An excellent player can manipulate an opponent into doing things his way, while convincing the opponent he is getting things done his own way. Dan Shoham mentions some of these points in his column in this issue.

Sun Tzu calls these methods "indirect methods" in a later chapter (*Energy*), and goes on to say:

In all fighting, the direct method may be used for joining battle, but indirect methods will be needed in order to secure victory.

Examples of indirect methods are: hiding order beneath disorder, simulating fear, keeping the enemy on the move, holding out baits to manipulate an opponent's actions - just the kind of tricks a Diplomacy player may use.

Another relevant point made is:

Now the general who wins a battle makes many calculations in his temple ere the battle is fought. The general who loses a battle makes but few calculations beforehand.

Okay, so perhaps the word "temple" doesn't quite fit in these days, but the idea does. In Diplomacy, you can gain a tremendous advantage by playing out the possibilities into the future. Try to predict what the other players will do. When deciding on your own moves, consider not just what will happen this move, but also the next move or two after that, and try to estimate how others will react in response to each of those moves. Determine the worst thing your opponent can do and consider the chances of him doing it. Do you play conservatively or take risks? Do you assume worst-case, or try to determine the most-probable moves which may not be worst case? It's all a big numbers game, and the more calculation you do, the better off you'll be.

Sun Tzu has the following to say in the chapter *Attack by Stratagem*:

Supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting. Thus, the highest form of generalship is to balk the enemy's plans; the next best is to prevent the junction of the enemy's forces; the next in order is to attack the enemy's army in the field....

Here, I believe that Sun Tzu was stating the above ranking in terms of minimizing the cost of war (military expenses, lost lives, etc.), in which case it is preferable to not engage the enemy in actual fighting. But you can look at this also in the context of Diplomacy. Why else do we set up DMZs or arrange for non-aggression pacts with neighbors? You have a limited number of units to use against opponents. It requires fewer units to disrupt an opponent's plans (say, by convincing his neighbor to attack him) or to keep enemy units at a distance by bouncing them than it does to defend against supported attacks. Any place you reduce the need for the presence of your units means you have more units to concentrate elsewhere, against other enemies.

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.

In Diplomacy, the above applies not just to your enemies, but to all players; even an ally is an opponent in terms of the game. The more you know about your opponents, the better will be your chances of outguessing them, predicting their moves, deceiving them and manipulating them.

Most players have at some point been in a situation where they knew or could guess what another player would do, from watching their style of play or through press, and used that knowledge either to attack them or successfully defend against an attack. It is also quite probable that somebody has successfully predicted what you were going to do in the same manner. Thus, if you assume other players have the same goal, the above quote has an obvious corollary: don't let your opponents know you. For some reason Sun Tzu's two separate statements of this corollary appear only several chapters later:

Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night...

and

Do not repeat the tactics which have gained you one victory, but let your methods be regulated by the infinite variety of circumstances.

In *Tactical Dispositions* Sun Tzu says:

The good fighters of old first put themselves beyond the possibility of defeat, and then waited for an opportunity of defeating the enemy. To secure ourselves against defeat lies in our own hands, but the opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself. Thus, the good fighter is able to secure himself against defeat, but cannot make certain of defeating the enemy. He wins his battles by making no mistakes. Making no mistakes is what establishes the certainty of victory....

Two important lessons for Diplomacy players: to make yourself as invulnerable to attack as possible, and to not make mistakes. If there is the possibility for you to be attacked, there is the possibility for you to lose. It's usually not long before players achieve understanding of the concept of stalemate lines. Once your position is secure, you have much more freedom to plan your moves and look for an opening for an attack of your own.

Not making mistakes is perhaps obvious, but that doesn't stop people. That includes myself as well. I recently was in a game where I had set up a stalemate line and guaranteed a win though it would take me a while to get the last SC. To hold my stalemate line, I had one unit that could either support another unit of mine or attack a neighboring enemy unit. I accidentally made a mistake with my orders and attacked my own unit, letting my two opponents take that SC. I reestablished the stalemate line, but without that SC, the game will now end as a 3-way draw instead of a win. Some bad moves are not recognized as such until after the fact, but considerable effort should be made to avoid making outright errors such as this.

Another piece of advice from the *Art of War*:

There are [several] dangerous faults which may affect a general: (1) Recklessness, which leads to destruction; (2) cowardice, which leads to capture; (3) a hasty temper, which can be provoked by insults; (4) a delicacy of honor which is sensitive to shame

These are things to avoid in yourself, and things to encourage and take advantage of in others. I've mentioned a couple of these points above. Dan Shoham spoke about hasty tempers in his column, and the idea of honor has come up countless times in discussions on whether or not stabbing is right or wrong, fair or unfair. The question of honor came up in Stephen Lepley's column as well.

I'll just close with another quote from the *Art of War* which I happened to like and which I think sums things up nicely:

The art of war teaches us to rely not on the likelihood of the enemy's not coming, but on our own readiness to receive him; not in the chance of his not attacking, but rather on the fact that we have made our position unassailable.

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