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NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

THEORIES AND CONSEQUENCES

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The scene is set in the Elysian Fields, the fields of honor and afterworld for Earth's warriors. This is not a boisterous Valhalla, however: more in keeping with the traditions of the Greek afterworld, of all arrivals there is required an appropriate atonement for earthly actions. The act of atonement meted out to **Major General Carl von Clausewitz** (of the nineteenth century Prussian Army) is to present – over and over again – his unfinished manuscript, *On War*, to his peers for their comment. Von Clausewitz's interlocutor on this occasion is **Sun-zi (Master Sun)**, who is perhaps Sun Wu, legendary general of fifth century B.C. China and author of (or inspiration for) *The Art of War*. The specified atonement for Sun-zi is, apparently, to have his actual identity obscured.

Sun-zi: I am honored to meet you, General von Clausewitz. I have observed you from afar, of course. I have read with delight your great works.

Von Clausewitz: Master Sun, the honor is mine. It is my misfortune to have missed the opportunity of acquainting myself with your writings before commencing my own life's work. There was little peaceful contact between my country and France in the years after the French Revolution; otherwise I might have seen the translation into French of *The Art of War* made by *le Père Amiot* in 1772. I have, since arriving Here, had the opportunity to read your book and have profited greatly thereby.

Sun-zi: Is the book mine? I do not recall. The ideas it contains are very familiar, however; I know I used them all during my campaigns. Interesting: we two fought in similar circumstances. You and General Sun Wu both fought in the armies of sovereigns who were consolidating in political terms a population and territory already united by a common language and culture. For the Han Chinese, the Mandate of Heaven – so elusive in my day! – would be conferred upon the victorious sovereign. In essence, we fought to establish Heaven's will for our people.

Von Clausewitz: It is true that the German people were caught up in a process of nation-state consolidation that began before me and continued long after my death. During my formative years, however, we were pressured from without by the expansionist determination of Revolutionary France. One cannot over-emphasize the importance of the Emperor and supreme general of modern times: Napoleon Bonaparte, whose victories and losses shaped war and peace for my generation and, indeed, a whole century. I'm sure you have deduced that my humble scribblings are dominated by his history. The French people created their revolutionary nation-state; we outside it were now opposed by a people whose will combined with the policy of their rulers – including Napoleon himself in later stages – and the creativity of Bonaparte's military genius.

Sun-zi: Ah, the trinity! It is central to your great work, *On War*. Passion, rationality, creativity...the people, the government, the military. It is this construct that fascinates me: simple in expression, yet complex and comprehensive in meaning. It could be Chinese.

Von Clausewitz: I am profoundly honored to have you say so.

Sun-zi: Yet, I am vexed as I contemplate its application. I cannot conceive of a whole that has three parts yet functions as one. How do the relationships work when three are in mutual opposition? Everything and everyone is subject to the force of everything else, and likewise exerts force on all other things and people. These forces are dual, mutual in nature. This truth – for such it is – applies to all things from heavenly bodies to the minutest grain of sand. These forces are named many different things in their many different contexts. I am not a philosopher nor a scientist but a man of war who must make tangible accomplishments using intangible ideas; so I call these forces *zheng* and *qi*. *Zheng* represents the normal, direct and straightforward force, easily understood and applied – particularly in the military sense. *Qi*, however...*qi* defies clear expression. It is the product of boldness, the force of indirection; it alone can bring victory in battle. It is the extraordinary force. *Qi* is comprised of surprise and deception, speed and skill.

Qi brings victory without battle, something that *zheng* can never produce. The two forces are both necessary in war as in many other enterprises. I fear that I fail to describe *qi* adequately in my own humble works! I grope for words.

Von Clausewitz: There is no doubt that the defense and the offense are both key to success. It is a great paradox that the defense is stronger, though it will not win the war because the defending army does not gain territory. The offense alone will bring victory.

Sun-zi: We agree: invincibility lies in the defense; the possibility of victory is in the attack. But I must clarify. *Zheng* is not the same as the defense, nor is *qi* the offense! Perhaps the best way to explain is in terms of your own trinity: in this context, *zheng* represents rationality and *qi* creativity. I cannot find a force equivalent to your passion, however; hence my puzzlement. Our people did not decide upon war and peace; nor, in those days, did they affect the direction of the Mandate of Heaven. They were the grass, always growing, ever-present, entirely necessary, supporting the sovereign, bending in his direction. Their will was subordinate to that of Heaven, which was expressed by their sovereign's very existence. As long as the sovereign ruled with righteousness and maintained harmony with his subjects, he enjoyed a mandate from Heaven and the people's will naturally subordinated itself. How could it be otherwise? And how can one separate the people's will from that of their sovereign...indeed, from the will of Heaven itself?

Von Clausewitz: I suppose I must point to the emergence of the people's will in Revolutionary France. For centuries prior to this cataclysm, their will was properly subordinate; in 1789, however, they had in France what you would probably refer to as a passing of the Mandate. A seizure of the Mandate, in fact, by the people themselves. It was unsustainable, of course – what people can rule for themselves, adrift without a leader? Their hour of need produced the man: Napoleon. But Napoleon's army, for all its imperial trappings and aspirations, was first and foremost an army of the French people. Napoleon's power derived

from his ability to exploit their passion, to channel it through his creativity to the rational end: victory. But I digress from our attempts to reconcile the trinity to your dyad of forces, *zheng* and *qi*. I am struck by their similarity to my concept of polarity. Victory in battle is composed of tension and movement; advantage is relative and changeable. Perhaps these elements comprise *zheng* and *qi*.

Sun-zi: I note, Herr General, that you were not able to complete your thinking in this area. This is unfortunate. You have captured an element of the force that obtains between opposing armies, and wisely note that victory is a product of genuine polarity, whereas the process of the same decisive battle is one of relative movement, not true polarity. But war is not about battle. Battle is to be avoided.

Von Clausewitz: I am dismayed, Master Sun. How can you side with those who would reduce war to a series of geometric forms and prescriptive theories? Who fail to comprehend its essence of bloodshed and violence? I am best remembered as the author of this one line (ironically, I wrote it hastily; a simple paragraph header): “War is merely the continuation of policy by other means.” But that does not alter the fact that policy goes to war when it requires a decision; the decision requires battle.

Sun-zi: Herr General, in this is the very truth of *zheng* and *qi*. Proper use of these two forces produces the necessary decision: without battle if possible, in battle if necessary. You will understand me when I say that the battle is won before it is even joined: one army has the advantage of surprise, or terrain, or strength, or timing – or several of these. Most frequently, only one army has the advantage of its leader... Many of these elements can be produced by the commander’s careful calculation; one – the leader himself – is dependent on the sovereign’s judgment and thus on Heaven’s provisions.

Von Clausewitz: I must respectfully disagree with most of this, Master Sun. Numbers are irrelevant; the commander is rarely able to enhance his force significantly above its given

numbers. Surprise consists in speed and timing, it is true: surprise is the appearance of the greatest possible number of troops at a place and time unexpected by the enemy. Surprise is lost once the battle begins, however. Its advantage is transitory and based on numbers, which the commander cannot control. Surprise does not win battles. However, as two old army generals, we need not dispute the advantages of terrain!

Sun-zi: Indeed, numbers alone convey no advantage. But here, Herr General, you have touched the central point of my force dyad: the effects of *qi*, even when successfully employed against the enemy, are undoubtedly transitory. Once *qi*'s force is invoked, it transforms itself into *zheng* and new ways to apply *qi* elsewhere in time and space must be found. Surprise does not end once battle begins. But *qi* does not limit itself to surprise. Deception is also important.

Von Clausewitz: Deception is a part of surprise. One of course hopes to deceive the enemy regarding the size of one's forces and the tactics to be employed. Its uses are similarly limited: once battle has begun, the enemy is likely to divine one's strength and intentions. The commander hopes that this realization comes too late to assist the enemy in his tactics and dispositions. Any other use of deception is true cunning, which is a result of weakness, by which I mean, in part, a lack of sufficient military strength to bring to bear in battle. A good commander will never allow himself to become so weak as to be forced to stoop to cunning.

Sun-zi: You must excuse me, but all warfare is based on deception. Certainly one must hide the shape – meaning the size, composition and direction – of one's army from the enemy. But more than this: secret operations are essential to an army's every move. Cunning is not to be dismissed: with well-placed, reliable agents one can not only know the enemy's tactics and dispositions, one can influence them! Such agents are the treasure of the sovereign and his general. How else can one know the name and character of the enemy, how to deceive him and lure him into error...how to assassinate him if such is the plan.

Von Clausewitz: You have the advantage of me, sir. War is a bloody business, but assassination is not a military man's work, I fear. Master Sun, in war many intelligence reports are contradictory, even more are false and most are uncertain. I have written, "War has a way of masking the stage with scenery crudely daubed with fearsome apparitions." The commander must be able to see through these apparitions, to bring the essential elements of his battle scene out of the natural fog and friction of war. Elaborate deceptions can increase the fog and thus turn on their author.

Sun-zi: Proper employment of *zheng* and *qi* can help to dissipate the fog and ease the friction of war, Herr General. But here I believe you are referring to what you call *coup d'oeil*. This is an important element in your writings.

Von Clausewitz: *Coup d'oeil*. This is the ability to recognize "at a glance" (which is the meaning of the French phrase I use) a truth or situation that most others would perceive only after long study and reflection. It is the single most important element of military genius. Without military genius, a commander is little better than adequate to his task.

Sun-zi: A general must possess five qualities: wisdom, sincerity, humanity, courage, strictness.

Von Clausewitz: To these I would add determination, energy, a balanced character, judgment, conviction, imagination and a longing for glory and renown.

Sun-zi: Are you thinking here of the Emperor Napoleon?

Von Clausewitz: In fact, in large part I am. He once wrote that one does not require spirit in war – by which he meant martial spirit, a love of war – but exactitude and simplicity. To this he added firmness of character and the resolution to conquer at any price. He believed that the art of being sometimes audacious and sometimes very prudent is the secret of success in war.

Sun-zi: How delightful! A disciple of *zheng* and *qi*, and he the greatest Western general of modern times. I am distinctly flattered.

Von Clausewitz: Really. I fail to see this.

Sun-zi: If Napoleon was able to predicate his army's maneuvers and dispositions on a combination of tactics both audacious – the extraordinary force, *qi* – and prudent – the normal force, *zheng* – then he was indeed conversant in my theory. It is even possible that he read the works attributed to me in Father Amiot's translation though a simpler explanation is that military geniuses think alike in all times and places. It is sad that he succumbed to impatience.

Impatience is a combination of two of the five possible downfalls of a general, recklessness and quick temper. (The others are, it almost goes without saying, cowardice, pride and compassion.)

That impatience had captured his genius is evident in his poor use of *qi* – non-existent, truly – when he invaded Russia. This was a disastrous employment of *zheng* unleavened by *qi*.

Napoleon penetrated Russia much too deeply, leaving in his rear many cities and towns; it is true, as Cao Cao says, that this is a difficult path to return from. Alas! Napoleon's *qi* had long since turned to *zheng* by the time of Waterloo – remember, this is the nature of *qi*, to transform itself into *zheng* – and Napoleon's creativity did not extend to new uses of *qi*.

Von Clausewitz: Perceptions of Napoleon are many and varied. Even in all his greatness, Napoleon failed to see that he must plan for an end-state that was realistic and stable. He could not transform his many victories into a lasting peace. This, perhaps, was the source of the impatience that you correctly note. He lacked a coherent diplomacy.

Sun-zi: Diplomacy – another arrow necessary to the general's quiver. One must understand the language of envoys. It is purposely deceptive – it uses *qi* in ways that must be untangled painstakingly. The process is a delicate one: many threads, a part of the Divine Skein of secrecy even when seemingly straightforward!

Von Clausewitz: I must say, diplomacy seems to work best after the battle has been won. War is undertaken to force the enemy to do one's will – at that point diplomacy is not only

possible but desirable to implement a stable peace. But I am intrigued: what others among history's great generals do you claim as your disciples?

Sun-zi: All successful generals use *zheng* and *qi*, Herr General! Though of course few were personally acquainted with my theories. The great Julius Caesar – in some ways, another Napoleon, more *zheng* than *qi* but well able to use the latter force when necessary. He too succumbed to impatience and also arrogance, which is the downfall of pride. Hannibal Barca: here was a worthy general. He used *zheng* and *qi* with great art, assembling a great force, moving with speed, taking the unexpected route over the Alps, taking the indirect route – he even marched through salt marshes to surprise the Romans! They never knew his shape.

Von Clausewitz: Forgive me, Master Sun, but *zheng* and *qi* seem to require excessively complicated maneuver. The shortest roads to the goal are the best; endless discussions about moving left or right, doing this or that, are otiose. This confuses the army, preventing timely concentration.

Sun-zi: It is true that one must concentrate at the proper time; but one must also prevent the enemy from concentrating at the proper time! Deny him your shape, confuse and deceive him. You have understood, however, the essence: Nothing is more difficult than the art of maneuver; it is oh so difficult to maintain the use of *qi*! Like Napoleon, Hannibal's *qi* became *zheng*: Scipio Africanus absorbed his *qi* and turned it against him, Hannibal could summon no more. However, he succumbed to no general's downfall, but was finally betrayed by his country's government. The sovereign interfered! Always a cardinal error. Once war has begun, the general must prosecute it. Sometimes one must "fail to hear" the sovereign's commands... Who else? Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant: they knew *qi*. Both were occasionally impatient – and Lee, of course, finally fell prey to the recklessness born of desperation. Alas, they used *zheng* in ways that fall outside my theories, and failed to adapt either force to the technological progress of warfare in their times. I am wandering from my topic somewhat but while

considering the progress of weapons, the recent introduction of thermonuclear weapons provides a perfect example of the force dyad. Here, at least, we may agree: these weapons must not be used; the war must be won before a battle that would require them is joined. So, despite their unearthly destructive potential, they represent another form of *qi*: latent power, restraint, the entire psychological struggle of deterrence. If they are ever used...they of course will transform themselves into the direct force. But at present, despite what might seem to be the immense and very direct threat these weapons represent, they are a use of *qi*.

Von Clausewitz: My theories retreat before this form of warfare. I never contemplated absolute war as entailing anything so apocalyptic as the assured destruction of both parties. But absolute war is nevertheless an interesting case. The American civil war was, for the Confederacy at least, a total war – a phenomenon General Sun probably did not encounter in his lifetime. Perhaps your theories do not apply here.

Sun-zi: Oh, absolute war. Here, of course, your trinity is most applicable. Yet one cannot forget Genghis Khan: a leader of armies, a true ruler! He of course was thoroughly conversant in my theories; some of his counselors were Chinese. The Great Khan knew that speed, silence, organization and secrecy (he had excellent intelligence, always) were the keys. All Mongols were part of the army; your passion, reason and creativity were united. But Genghis Khan won his battles ahead of time through maneuver, and diplomacy: when after his death his successor Subotai invaded Hungary, the Venetians were supplying him with intelligence. Subotai even garnered the tacit support of the Pope of all Christendom, imagine it! One must note that though the Mongols' methods were brutal, they took their vast new territory largely intact and administered it carefully: for who can exact tribute of dead men? If the peace cannot be maintained, what has been gained?

Von Clausewitz: Civil war requires a decision; you eschew decisive battle, Master Sun. How do you reconcile this seeming inconsistency?

Sun-zi: Civil war is in accordance with my theories in that it is usually a last resort. It is true, however, that civil war of its nature seems to require a firm decision. Of all wars, it is the most passionate! The less passionate of the two sides, however, seems to prevail regardless of relative strength – a cool head, determination and patience will win the day. I turn to my greatest disciple, Mao Zedong, the victorious leader in China’s most recent civil war. Mao was more a political man than a military one, and he knew what to look for in his general: bravery and wisdom. Mao knew that he must take All-Under-Heaven, meaning China, intact. He did this by treating all with justice – this is how the Mandate passed to him. He was a master of maneuver, thoroughly artful with *qi*! “When the enemy advances, retreat; when the enemy halts, harass; when the enemy seeks to avoid battle, attack; when the enemy retreats, pursue.” Does this sound familiar, Herr General?

Von Clausewitz: Yes, Master Sun. Clearly he is your disciple. I am beginning to see that *qi* might have been at work during the Duke of Wellington’s Peninsular Campaign against the French army occupying Spain. There, a popular war – what I referred to as insurrection, actually a classic *résistance* – was stirred up to harass the occupiers. It seems quite limited in uses however; the terrain and popular will in Spain facilitated insurrection in this case. In other cases, it might not be successful.

Sun-zi: Herr General, insurrection and *résistance* are perfect examples of the uses of *qi*. *Zheng* waits, so patiently, for *qi* to win the battle before it is begun. Then the direct force attacks. All forms of guerrilla warfare, an increasingly common form of strife, are heavily dependent on *qi*. By use of indirection, shapelessness, surprise, secrecy, speed, skill and timing, eventually the morale of the greater force is quite dissipated. No army can withstand that. The war is won, though likely no decisive battle has been fought. Here *qi* does proceed from weakness but follows its true nature: through skilled application of all the elements of *qi*, the forces may be carefully marshaled until they touch off “a series of calamities, which, in accordance with the law

of falling bodies, will keep gathering momentum,” as you so clearly expressed it. Thus it eventually becomes *zheng*, the direct and, in this case, dominating force. There is, however, a significant vulnerability, which must be exploited by the opponents of any guerrilla force: such a force is frequently able to attack only through the brilliance of a commander who possesses in great measure all the attributes we have discussed. We both know such commanders are rare; if the guerrillas’ leader can be eliminated, this is usually the fatal blow. Opponents of guerrillas must therefore use *qi* as well: secrecy above all, secrecy in the form of covertness. It is so delicate; few succeed in accomplishing this. The more asymmetrical the situation, the more challenging the task for the larger, stronger force: this is a paradox but proven many times over. The larger force is captured by its *zheng* – a prisoner of its own size and strength! It must strive to bring *qi* to bear by the means I describe above, plus one more: justice. If the sovereign against whom the guerrillas struggle is not ruling with righteousness...perhaps Heaven is effecting a change. Opposing Heaven’s will in these matters is pointless.

Von Clausewitz: Master Sun, if I did not know you as a great military genius and proven general I would suspect that you harbor some admiration for these lesser military forces and their inferior forms of warfare. Surely I am mistaken?

Sun-zi: What you see, Herr General, is an admiration for successful practitioners of all forms of warfare. I also admit to a certain willingness to tolerate ambiguity. I do not, however, admire success in every situation involving unconventional warfare. The forces of corruption use *qi* very successfully. Here I am referring to developments that largely postdate both of our lifetimes: organized crime, narcotics trafficking, terrorism. These must be ruthlessly exterminated, but the direct force must again be used sparingly. Though *zheng* is always important, *qi* is more suited to these matters, for the terrorists and criminals are masters of deception themselves – and are very focused on their foul work. They have no real territory to defend, they seem to have unlimited creativity – when their *qi* is exercised and transforms itself to

zheng, so that it can be discerned and opposed, they abandon that tactic or objective and turn to another. They have much more *qi* to summon for further evil. They are shapeless; their opponents are large and powerful nation-states, yet unable to counter these devils. To counter them, the nation-states must attack their strategy first, then their alliances, only after that should they attack their armies of lackeys. They should not attack the population centers where the evildoers hide; this would be the worst policy.

Von Clausewitz: I believe I finally see the trinity emerging from this discussion of *zheng* and *qi*. The criminals and terrorists have perhaps used my concept to analyze their opponents and found that the nation-states in question lack passion, creativity and reason to pursue the war on corruption. The people have not the will, the military neither the means nor the habit and the government not the reason, therefore, to wage the kind of determined, united, absolute – if entirely unconventional! – war that these situations require. It seems these evildoers will prevail, in a limited way – because they accept limitations on their objectives. If they didn't – if they pursued absolute war against the nation-states they now harass – perhaps they would find themselves opposed by the implacable will of the people.

Sun-zi: Your talk of nation-states has also opened up a vista for me. Your trinity applies well to nation-states, if less well to other forms of political organization, such as kingdoms, true empires, kinship-based systems or non-state actors. It is the nation aspect of “nation-state” that makes the difference: the nation is the nation of people, a coherent, unified group – perhaps ethnically diverse, perhaps not – that has become a participant in its own destiny. The process of consolidation completed, its people and territory now united by culture, language and purpose, the nation-state is a completed whole. As external threats would now threaten the people in every respect – economic, political and cultural – this sense of nationhood and unity frequently inspires the people to accept nothing less than absolute war, unconditional surrender. But whether their objectives are total or limited, nation-states, because of their distinct national characters, approach

the problem of war differently from each other and so must be analyzed, each one separately, in terms that encompass the whole: people, government, military, each element balanced by the forces of the other two elements of the structure. A unified trinity: passion, rationality, creativity – all one force, vying with the trinity of another nation-state – thus creating a larger duality. It is elegant, Herr General! I applaud you.

Von Clausewitz: Thus my geometric construct is imbued with human energy. For my part, Master Sun, I only regret that our acquaintance comes too late to allow me to revise my works. To address war in its entirety, as any book titled *On War* must surely aspire to do, I should study more fully the issues of *zheng* and *qi*, the direct and indirect. I can see now that I have the beginnings only of the indirect force. I am blamed, you know, because some military men who followed me failed to comprehend my later thoughts. My writings are so extensive – and in places less developed in thinking than would have been the case had I lived to revise them – that anyone can justify almost any course of action in war by citing me. I believe my work would benefit from closer study of your five elements of war, the nine types of terrain, the five methods of attacking with fire...

Sun-zi: Ha-ha! Herr General, those numbers are checklists, mnemonic devices. Everyone who picks up a book on warfare wants prescriptive admonitions, instructions, specific advice – not philosophy. You clearly understood this! There is really only one thing: victory, by which I mean the ultimate advantage. To maintain the permanent advantage is the true art of warfare, and policy. The ability to see clearly the permanent advantage is the necessary gift not only of a general, and of a sovereign, but also of a statesman – *coup d'oeil* is more important than it ever has been. You are rightly remembered for what you call your paragraph header, though I would reword it. War is truly (not merely) the continuation of policy by other means.

Von Clausewitz: So a policy of war is followed by a policy of peace...which is followed by a policy of war. “In war the result is never final.”

Sun-zi: Another deceptively simple phrase; I wish I had composed it. Many forget this truth, to their ruination. Indeed, conflict breeds conflict...a constantly turning wheel. War follows peace, peace precedes war. "Of the four seasons, none lasts forever; of the days, some are long and some are short, and the moon waxes and wanes." Please permit an old soldier his poetry.

Von Clausewitz: Master Sun, your entire work is poetry for the warrior's soul. Your servant, sir.

Sun-zi: Until we meet again, then, honored General.

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