

Swedish Art of War and Sun Tzu's

by *Karlis Neretnieks and Shou Xiaosong*

THIS ARTICLE AIMS at comparing Swedish military thinking with the thoughts of Sun Tzu as presented in his work *The Art of War* written some 2,500 years ago. The idea is not just to find similarities or differences in the way of looking at war and its different components in a historical context, but the paper might also serve a purpose in trying to find factors that it would be foolish to forget when thinking about the future.

Not everything has to be reinvented by every new generation of military thinkers. Our ancestors might also have something to contribute. By choosing periods when Swedish strategy, operational and tactical thinking could be regarded as a well thought-out (and successful) concept and comparing the basic ideas of these concepts with the thinking of Sun Tzu, at least two questions could be answered. Firstly, how well has the thinking of Sun Tzu stood up to the test of time? Secondly, are there factors that probably should always be taken into consideration when creating military organizations and preparing them for war? It makes the comparison more interesting as it may point at "eternal" factors that could be generally applied. If that is the case, it is a fascinating thought that a 2,500-year-old book, and the ideas of kings that lived

300 years ago, might be worth studying in today's war academies.

Essentials of Swedish Military Thinking

When it comes to Swedish conceptual military thinking, three periods stand out as especially interesting. The first are the reforms of Gustavus Adolphus in the early 17th century, creating both a state and an army that enabled Sweden to play a prominent role in European politics and eventually also leading to Sweden becoming a great power. The second period is when Charles XI, in the late 17th century, had to create a concept that made it possible for a small, economically weak state to defend its "empire" against rising great powers in its neighborhood. The third period is the Cold War when Sweden, squeezed between two blocs, led by superpowers, had to create a military concept that made its non-aligned policy reasonably credible.

Gustavus Adolphus – Creator of a Great Power

Gustavus Adolphus (1594-1632) together with his Chancellor Axel Oxenstierna laid the foundations both for a modern Swedish army and a society able to support it by very far-reaching administrative

reforms. Ministries with specific responsibilities were organized and a strong central bureaucracy was created. All provinces were given a similar structure. The governors, appointed by the king, had very clear tasks regarding taxation, justice and military matters. Among other things, each province had to raise a regiment for the national army. This was the beginning of the Swedish territorial system for recruiting soldiers, which survived till the end of the Cold War. To a very large extent these reforms aimed at making the most out of the scarce resources of the country, making it possible to compete with richer but less well organized countries.

The strategic dilemma Gustavus Adolphus faced was that Sweden was surrounded by hostile states more powerful than his own, both militarily and economically. The two options he had were either to wait for the enemy, sooner or later invading Sweden, or to adopt a pre-emptive strategy and to move the war abroad, into the enemy's territory. The latter option would also be economically sounder, let the enemy's provinces pay for the war. It was also obvious to Gustavus Adolphus that the relatively small Swedish army would never be able to compete with the continental armies in size. It had to be better. To achieve this he approached the problem from three angles: organization, training and tactics. Although the provinces had a great role in supporting the army by raising and supporting the territorial regiments, it was very much centrally run when it came to organization, training and equipment.

The main tactical formation on the continent in those times was the "Tertia", a very large formation grouped as a square. Sometimes it was called the Spanish-Netherlands model. It had great striking power when it engaged another formation,

but it was cumbersome. It moved slowly and had difficulties in maneuvering on the battlefield. Gustavus Adolphus' solution for being able to meet and defeat an enemy using such tactics was to increase the maneuverability and the fire power of the Swedish units. By making the battalion the basic unit and developing a system where battalions could quickly form brigades he achieved two things: the maneuverability of the battalion and the staying power of a brigade. He also increased the number of muskets in the infantry and used light artillery pieces in direct support of the infantry. The tactics were very much a combination of defensive fire to wear down an advancing enemy followed by swift counterattacks by fast moving units that could maneuver on the battlefield.

Perhaps one of the greatest achievements in creating the "New Swedish Army" of Gustavus Adolphus is that the military bureaucracy he created at the time was able to train all the regiments, spread all over the country, in this new and for the whole army common way of fighting. He was also fully aware of the importance it had to the morale that he was seen among the troops on the battlefield. This eventually led to his death at the battle of Lützen in 1632.

Charles XI – Defending an Overstretched Empire

The other, often forgotten, great Swedish military reformer in this period was King Charles XI (1655-1697). The "Swedish Empire", created by Gustavus Adolphus and his successors, had to be defended against its neighbors, especially Russia and Poland, but also Denmark – nations that had long standing grievances against Sweden after having lost territories to it during the 17th century. As the king was

very aware of the hazards of war (“It is easy to start a war, but how it ends is in the hands of God”), his main aim was therefore to create a deterrence, potent enough to discourage any would-be aggressor. To achieve this, the army was during his reign totally reorganized and Sweden became a “militarized” country. Not only were most of the state’s resources allocated to the military, but also the civilian administration and the church were given important roles in supporting the armed forces.

The main problem that confronted Charles XI was how to maintain a large enough army over time, considering Sweden’s very limited economic base. The whole country at that time had only 2.5 million inhabitants. Sweden was also mainly an agrarian country and creating a standing army with paid, full-time soldiers was out of the question. Just a few regiments, such as the Life Guards, consisted of full-time soldiers. The solution he chose was to create a militia system where the soldiers were self-supporting farmers and where the state provided the small-holdings they lived on, and with just a small salary paid in cash. The same went for the officers, although they were granted bigger farms according to their rank. These farms were only on loan for the time the soldier or officer served.

As this system was based on the territorial organization introduced by Gustavus Adolphus it also meant that the ordinary soldiers and officers lived in the same area and knew each other well already in peacetime. This not only made it easy for the officers to keep an eye on the daily life of the soldiers, it also created a very strong unit cohesion. The officers and the soldiers shared similar problems when it came to crops, harvests, droughts and other problems connected with farming and daily

life. You were fighting together with friends and neighbors with a similar mindset.

In a geographically spread out militia organization adequate training will always be a problem. This was solved by having yearly meetings where the whole regiment gathered for two weeks to have regimental exercises. In the time between these larger exercises company-sized exercises were conducted on a regular basis. Basic skills were taught and rehearsed in connection with the Sunday sermons in the village church, which the soldiers were expected to attend. To ensure that all regiments trained in the same way and used the same tactics, new manuals and directives were distributed in an organized way, and the results were checked at the yearly regimental gatherings, very often by the King himself. On these occasions, the ordinary soldiers also had the opportunity to put forward their grievances directly to the King in person.

The few standing regiments, such as the Life Guards, were used for experimenting with new tactics and equipment. When something had proved successful and been established as a norm, officers from the Life Guards were sent out to the militia regiments to introduce the new ideas. Charles XI also introduced the same type of uniform for the whole army.

The demands on the officers were very high. The King was of the firm belief that everyone should serve his way up from the ranks, thereby gathering experience, proving his worth and also having a first-hand knowledge of the life of the rank and file. Although a large part of the officer corps consisted of persons of noble birth, where it was a tradition to serve in the army, this also opened up good career opportunities for ordinary soldiers that showed the right qualities.

Discipline was strict. This being an army where the protestant religion with its moral values played an important role – breaking both worldly as well as religious rules was severely punished. Also, not obeying orders and sacrilege could be punished on pain of death. Drunkenness was not tolerated and a third-time offender was flogged. For a married soldier to have an extramarital liaison meant running the gauntlet. Looking after the behavior of the soldiers was very much a task for the army chaplain allocated to the units. Every regiment had three chaplains appointed by the bishop of the province, but in consultation with the regimental commander. Nothing was allowed to impair the authority of the regimental commander, whose only loyalty was to the King.

Much of the reorganization was paid by expropriating many (most) of the estates belonging to the nobility. The nobility had amassed great wealth during Sweden's rise to a great power, when successful commanders and high-ranking officials had been given lands as a reward for their services, but this drained the resources of the state. This process of taking back from the present generation what their forefathers had been given, more or less forced the nobility to become servants of the state, military officers or civil servants. Although there was some opposition to the scheme, especially in the Baltic parts of the realm, surprisingly, it did not have an effect on the loyalty to the King by the noble families.

The tactics introduced by Charles XI very much reflected the operational and strategic needs of Sweden. With an empire that in reality was too large to defend with the Sweden's meager resources as well as being surrounded by enemies in all geographic directions, the only solution was to be able to concentrate your forces very

rapidly and then fight a decisive battle and subsequently being prepared to move in another direction. This led to the development of extremely offensive battlefield tactics.

Compared with Gustavus Adolphus, who often used a combination of defensive and offensive tactics, the army of Charles XI, when it went to war under his son Charles XII, only knew one way to fight: to attack. This can seem to be quite foolhardy, but in reality it was very logical. If you always expect to be outnumbered and if you are in a hurry to defeat your enemy, before the next enemy attacks then you have few options other than to create an organization with great offensive power. The aim, also very logical under the prevailing circumstances, was to totally defeat the enemy on the battlefield and not give him the opportunity to regroup and fight another day.

Apart from the strategic and operational needs, another factor that greatly influenced Swedish tactics was the experiences the King had from the battle of Lund in 1676. Here, as a newly appointed king, he barely managed to beat a Danish army. The Danes used what could be called "continental" tactics which he had great problems to counter.

In essence, the continental tactics relied on firepower delivered by infantry regiments forming an unbroken line, standing still to repel an attacking enemy or moving forward quite slowly to engage an enemy. The cavalry also very much relied on firepower where the front rows in the squadrons were continuously replaced according to a complicated rotation model with new men with reloaded pistols. Many battles ended inconclusively where one of the parties withdrew when it felt that it had suffered unacceptable losses. This quite rigid

model also gave few opportunities to pursue a beaten enemy as this would break up “the fighting line”.

To counter these “continental” tactics, and to create a model where the enemy was decisively beaten on each occasion, which was a necessity due to Sweden’s strategic situation, other tactics had to be developed. The answer was to create tactics where speed, maneuverability and charging were put in the first place. By attacking at high speed in quite narrow dense formations, not only local superiority was achieved, but it also created a shock effect that very often broke the rigid line of the opponent, thereby creating confusion and loss of control. The use of firepower normally consisted of just one or two heavy salvos at very short distances just before the attack went in with bayonets and sabers. Although this meant that the attacking units had to endure two or three salvos from the enemy while they advanced, the losses were surprisingly small, especially compared with two lines exchanging fire for a prolonged period.

All units were rigorously trained in these tactics and were always reminded that speed and attack was the key to success. The unit commanders were encouraged to use their own judgment and to use the mobility and striking power of their units to attack the enemy wherever they spotted a weakness.

This was both revolutionary and a step backwards. The abolishment of the linear thinking and instead looking at squadrons, battalions and regiments as units, which, according to the situation, could move independently on the battlefield led to great flexibility when it came to helping other units that might be in trouble, reinforcing success and, last but not least, pursuing and annihilating a beaten enemy. At the

same time, it was a step backwards in the sense that the sword and the bayonet were given a crucial role in an age when the use of muskets had become widespread. But considering the poor accuracy of the muskets and the time it took to reload them, it was a well considered decision, at least judging by the results. Altogether, the chosen model was extremely successful. When this army went to war under Charles XII, the King did not lose a battle for the first ten years of the Great Nordic War (1700-1718).

The system created by Charles XI continuously managed to raise new well-trained units for eighteen years from a country that was basically very poor. Only when Sweden was overwhelmed by the vastly greater military resources of Russia and Poland combined, and when they had sacrificed several armies in the process of learning how to counter the Swedish tactics, Sweden had to give up and sue for peace. This also ended Sweden’s role as a European great power.

The Cold War Era

Although Sweden in theory continued to think according the principle that threats should be countered by fighting wars outside Swedish territory for the next hundred years, this in reality was no longer possible. After the Napoleonic wars at the beginning of the 19th century, it was more than obvious that a new military strategy had to be developed. The new principle that was adopted implied that if Sweden was attacked, the enemy’s advance would be delayed for such a long time and that he (the enemy) would suffer such great losses that he would not regard it as being worthwhile to attack Sweden. This was a purely defensive strategy.

But being a large country (by European standards) with a small population, it was also obvious that this could not be achieved by only defensive measures such as fortifications and static defenses. Operational thinking and tactics, therefore, become a mix of fluid delaying actions and counter-attacks. This concept prevailed until the end of the Cold War. The idea probably reached its most mature and developed form during the Cold War with the development of a "Total Defense" concept. It was a system where all relevant parts of society, including industry, agriculture, social services, transportation and others were given pre-planned specific tasks in case of war.

One way of making this possible was to rely on the territorial organization already introduced by Gustavus Adolphus in the early 17th century. Soldiers were trained at the regiment in the province where they lived, and also had their war time assignments in the same regiment. There was also an elaborate system of keeping track of people moving to another province, and then either to transfer a soldier to another unit or arrange for transportation to his original unit. All this was done in order to speed up mobilization. Most of the officers spent the larger part of their careers in the same regiment, training the soldiers they would lead in war and getting to know each other well. This of course, just as in earlier times, also contributed to unit cohesion and thereby increased fighting power.

To compensate for not having standing forces, the officer corps, which was all professional, was given a very thorough training. The training and education of the officers was concentrated on subjects directly aiming at increasing the professional abilities of the officer, preparing him to be a commander and a staff member in a

tactical or operational staff. Operations, tactics, leadership, staff procedures and military technology were the main subjects. Little attention was paid to general academic education.

Two operational ideas governed war-time planning. In the sparsely populated northern parts of the country, where the threat was an invasion across a land border, the army would trade land for time, inflict losses on the enemy and then, when the time was ripe, stop him by a counteroffensive. In the south, the threat was a sea-borne invasion across the Baltic Sea. Here, the Navy and the Air Force would fight a "delaying action" by attacking the enemy at sea and then the Army would attack him immediately when he tried to land, preventing him from forming a bridgehead.

This "win or die" approach in repelling a sea-borne invasion had two reasons. To begin with there was no land to trade in southern Sweden before an enemy could reach vital industrial and densely populated areas. Secondly, as mentioned before, Sweden's military resources compared to those of an enemy were not large enough to wage a war of attrition. If you cannot win at an early stage you have lost, especially in the south.

The tactics employed very much reflected the Swedish understanding of the nature of war, the operational needs and the scarcity of resources. The basic assumption for Swedish tactics is that in war the unforeseen is the rule and that the enemy will be superior, at least in numbers and firepower. The only way to counter this is by offensive means and to be able to immediately take advantage of any opportunity that may appear. This rules out the idea of thoroughly pre-planned battles.

These basic principles are well illustrated by the following quotes from the Swedish field manual “AR 2”:

“Decisive success can only be achieved by offensive action.”

“Act by taking and keeping the initiative, take the risks this demands.”

“Local superiority is a prerequisite for success. This is mainly through achieved swift action and deception.”

“Swift action is a prerequisite for keeping the initiative. To achieve this, the commander’s main task is to lead ongoing operations (not planning). This he should do by personally being in close contact with the units that are in contact with the enemy (physically being on the spot).”

“Mission-oriented tactics is the basic principle for our way to lead (command).”

“Lack of intelligence must not delay an attack.”

“In war only the simple is possible.”

“The commander’s intent (goal) should be known among his subordinates.”

“Not acting is a greater fault by a commander than choosing the wrong means.”

It should be noted that these regulations were supposed to be followed by all command levels, not just the higher ones. Also, at the lowest level squads and platoons were imbued to act according to these principles. It is everyone’s responsibility, from the corporal to the general, to use his own initiative and use the resources at his disposal to exploit an opportunity.

This may seem to be a recipe for chaos – everyone doing what he thinks is best. Of course this risk cannot be neglected, but as long as everyone at all levels is clear about the task and the ultimate goal of his unit, then in most cases the sum of initiatives will lead to success. There will always be

a need to strike a balance between initiatives at lower levels and firm control, but this should never be applied in a way that it makes commanders afraid to act when they see an opportunity. It is then better to accept a certain amount of chaos as long there is still more chaos created on the enemy side.

Sun Tzu’s Art of War and Swedish Military Thinking

With a first name of Wu and a style-name of Changqing, Sun Tzu was a renowned military strategist in the last stage of the Spring and Autumn Period. In Chinese history, the Spring and Autumn Period (770 B.C.–476 B.C.) is not only a turbulent era of war among competing dukes and princes, but also an era when various thinking and cultures were flourishing. At this stage of development in Chinese civilization, various schools of thought emerged, such as Confucians represented by Confucius, Taoists represented by Lao Tzu, and Legalists represented by Li Li, etc. They disputed, questioned, and challenged among each other. Such contention and flourishing of numerous schools of thought gradually formulated a series of profound and rich thoughts, and had far-reaching repercussions on Chinese culture and tradition.

Represented by Sun Tzu, the military strategist was a very important school of thought during the Spring and Autumn Period. Sun Tzu had summarized over 1,500 years of war wisdoms since the Xia and Shang Dynasties (around the 21st century BC to the 11th century BC), combined it with the rich war practice of the Spring and Autumn Period, and wrote the *Sun Tzu’s Art of War*, the most ancient book on military theory in the world. With its 6,000 words in 13 chapters, *Sun Tzu’s Art*

of War gives a brilliant exposition on a series of basic issues concerning war, such as war preparations, strategic planning, operational principles, and ways of governing the armed forces. It is a classic of China's ancient military strategy, and also enjoys a high reputation in world military sciences.

Sun Tzu's Art of War is an ancient book on the art of war born in China about 2,500 years ago and its birth place, time, natural environment, and historical and cultural traditions are different from those in Sweden. However, standing on the basis of over 1,500 years of war practice from the Xia and Shang Dynasties to the Spring and Autumn Period, the book ponders upon many fundamental issues about war, and generalizes and reveals a series of basic laws of war. Its thoughts and viewpoints have been time and again verified by the following more than two thousand years of war history. That is an important reason why *Sun Tzu's Art of War* has been held in high esteem till now. When we make a comparison between *Sun Tzu's Art of War* and the military thinking and war practice in the several important periods in Swedish history, we may find there are many similarities, as is seen in the following:

Attaching Importance to War-Preparedness

Sun Tzu was not only a military strategist of great talent and bold vision, but also a thinker with a keen intellect. He fully understood that war is a matter of vital importance, bearing on the existence of the state and life and death of the people. Therefore, he advocated prudence about war and emphasized the importance of full preparations for war. In *Sun Tzu's Art of War*, this thought is expressed as "first ma-

king oneself invincible and then awaiting the enemy's moment of vulnerability."

"First making oneself invincible" means building up national and military strength in the first place, making full preparations for war, and putting oneself in an unconquerable position. Such a kind of preparations refers not only to strategic planning, but also to the elevation of military strength and includes both political and military preparations. "Awaiting the enemy's moment of vulnerability" means waiting for the opportunity to triumph over the enemy. Of course, judging from the general views of Sun Tzu, "awaiting" is by no means passively waiting, but actively seeking and even creating opportunities to win. According to Sun Tzu, "first making oneself invincible" is a leading factor for victories. Before a battle combat, a winning military commander has held in his hands the elements leading to victory, hence victory is inevitable. The fuller the pre-combat preparations are, the higher the probability is of success, and victory is even undoubted.

On the other hand, a losing military commander must be the one who has not been fully prepared, but expected to gain victory by sheer good luck. In the same vein, both the military and administrative reforms of Gustavus Adolphus and the efforts of King Charles XI to build a militarized country are moves conforming to the then strategic situations and "gaining victory beforehand". Only with a solid foundation of strength and full war preparations, can they successfully deal with strong opponents and make great achievements. Likewise, the growth in power of any regime throughout the ages in the world inevitably accords with Sun Tzu's view of "gaining victory beforehand".

Pre-emptive Strikes

Gustavus Adolphus adopted a pre-emptive strategy. The essence of Charles XI's emphasis on concentrating his forces very rapidly and then fighting a decisive battle is also taking pre-emptive strikes. In Chinese traditional thinking, there have been complete sets of thoughts for taking pre-emptive strikes and striking only after being struck, respectively. There is no distinction of superiority or inferiority between the two, and they should be chosen according to specific situations. However, by comparison, Sun Tzu laid more stress on pre-emptive strikes, i.e. launching swift and violent strikes by forceful strength and not allowing opportunities for the enemy to hit back. He said, as an invincible army, even when it attacks a powerful state, it can make it impossible for the enemy to assemble his forces, prevent his allies from joining him, and overawe the enemy; then it can take the enemy's cities and overthrow the enemy's state.

By advocating moving the war abroad into enemy territory, Gustavus Adolphus happened to share the same view with Sun Tzu. This view is based on the following two aspects. The first is economy. Being destructive, war usually consumes a large number of material resources and thus common people cannot live a normal life, and the security and stability of the regime will even be affected. Fighting in enemy territory cannot only "make up for the provisions relying on the enemy" and alleviate burdens on one's own country, but also weaken the enemy and strengthen oneself by plundering the enemy's manpower and material resources. "Becoming stronger in the course of defeating the enemy" means killing two birds with one stone. It is not difficult to

find that the starting point of Gustavus Adolphus' pre-emptive strategy lies in this.

The second is morale. Sun Tzu thought that when the soldiers penetrate deep into hostile territory, they will bear such heavy psychological pressure that they have to concentrate their attention on the enemy. In this way, combat effectiveness will be enhanced. *Sun Tzu's Art of War* has fully expounded on this point. From the psychological perspective, Sun Tzu's view sounds reasonable. However, the realities are more complicated. When penetrating deep into hostile territory, the soldiers may have a mental problem relating to the questioning of war justice and the adaptation to local environments. This will have a negative influence on their morale. Judging from the military actions taken by Gustavus Adolphus, Sun Tzu and Gustavus are of the same view.

Rapid Mobility

Strategically, Sun Tzu advocated a rapid victory. According to Sun Tzu, a prolonged war will not only break the spirit of the troops, but also result in financial difficulties for the country. If other countries take advantage of its weakness and attack at that time, the country will be in a perilous situation. The reasons why Charles XI expected to quickly end a war by a decisive battle are Sweden's meager resources on the one hand, and being surrounded by enemies in all geographic directions on the other hand. A little delay will lead to a passive situation of fighting along two or more battle lines.

Tactically, Sun Tzu also advocated unexpectedness and rapidness. According to Sun Tzu, speed is the key to utilizing one's troops. The principles of tactical activities are: launching an attack when the enemy

is unprepared, taking the unexpected route, and attacking the location where the enemy lacks precautions. A combination of rapidness and unexpectedness will take the enemy by surprise and thus the potential energy for attack will be increased. In *Sun Tzu's Art of War*, such kinds of operations are called "operations of extraordinary forces". Gustavus Adolphus had been committed to enhancing the maneuverability and firepower of his troops. His tactics were defensive fire for wearing down an advancing enemy followed by swift counterattacks by fast-moving units. This is just a demonstration of Sun Tzu's emphasis of "using the normal force to engage and using the extraordinary to win". The new tactics created by Charles XI are also characterized by speed, maneuverability and shock.

Gaining Victory in Accordance with the Enemy Situation

A war is an armed confrontation between opposing sides. The actions taken by any side will surely change the situation on the battlefield. It fundamentally determines the uncertainty of war and the flexibility of tactics. By an appropriate analogy, Sun Tzu clearly explained this point. According to Sun Tzu, the movement and change on the battlefield is just like water. Water flows from heights to lowlands and changes its course in accordance with the contours of the land; similarly, the employment of troops should also be flexible in accordance with the situation of the enemy. Water does not have a fixed form; similarly, a battlefield situation is not invariable.

Those who are adept in taking countermeasures in accordance with the specific enemy situation will succeed in winning. Gustavus Adolphus dealt with

the "Tertia", which was prevailing on the continent, by enhancing the maneuverability and firepower of his troops, and Charles XI dealt with the "continental" tactics by rapid offensives. Both are successful cases of formulating strategies and tactics in accordance with the enemy situation. In modern times, the basic assumption for Swedish tactics is that in war the unforeseen is the rule; therefore commanders at various levels are encouraged to act according to the changing situation. It coincides with Sun Tzu's thought of "working out victory in accordance with the situation of the enemy".

Taking the Initiative

The Swedish field manual clearly points out: "Act by taking and keeping the initiative", "Local superiority is a prerequisite for success", and "This is mainly by achieved swift action and deception." Military practices in Swedish history, from Gustavus Adolphus to Charles XI and to the Cold War era, have fully proven the validity of these principles. From the perspective of world military history, taking the initiative and seeking local superiority are also regarded as military principles of universal guiding significance.

Sun Tzu had a comprehensive and profound exposition on these principles, mainly in the chapter of "weaknesses and strengths" in *Sun Tzu's Art of War*. Sun Tzu pointed out that the one who is skilled in war brings the enemy to the field of battle and is not brought there by him. The main method of moving the enemy is to "feign activity". Sun Tzu enumerated many feigned activities, whose essentials are speed, unexpectedness, concealing the intention, and attacking the location where the enemy must rush to protect and save.

The purpose of moving the enemy is to disperse his strength, and concentrate one's own strength. When local superiority is achieved, the enemy will be beaten smoothly. Taking this as a reference frame for examining Swedish military practices, it is easy to find that the success of Gustavus Adolphus and Charles XI is because they based it on the technological conditions of their respective times, successfully combined different tactics, created local superiority, and took the initiative of war.

Paying Attention to the Role of Commanders

Although Swedish emphasis on officers has a bearing on the lack of a standing army, it objectively complies with the unique requirements of war. On the rapidly changing battlefield, commanders at various levels are the formulators and executors of strategies and tactics. Emphasizing and using the commanders' initiative is a necessary condition for gaining victory. Sun Tzu had a profound understanding of the importance of generals. He pointed out that generals decide the destiny of the country and the people. An excellent general should have versatile qualities, including wisdom, sincerity, benevolence, courage, and strictness; he should honor national and public interests and should not seek fame and gain, nor shirk responsibilities. On the battlefield, the general's authority of making decisions as the situation demands should be fully respected. Sun Tzu's well-known sayings are: "he whose generals are able and not interfered with by the sovereign will win" and "some commands of the sovereign must not be obeyed".

Unfortunately, after Sun Tzu's time, with the development of feudal despotism in China, the power of generals was usually

regarded as a threat to monarchical power. Strict precautions and limitations were taken against generals' power, and Sun Tzu's thoughts had not been duly carried through. However, the consistent emphasis and encouragement of the initiative in grassroots officers in the Swedish military have well confirmed Sun Tzu's principles about generals.

Officers and Men of One Heart

The military system of Sun Tzu's time is different from that of any period in Sweden. This is not important. What is important is that the territorial system in Swedish military organizations has made officers and men closely related, and thus enhanced the cohesion and combat effectiveness of the troops. At the same time, strict discipline and unified training has guaranteed the unification of tactics and techniques. All the above conforms to the military principles advocated by Sun Tzu. He pointed out that it is an essential factor of victory for the soldiers and generals to work together with one heart. To reach this aim, generals should not only take good care of the soldiers and cultivate mutual attachment, but also maintain military discipline in order to ensure strict enforcement of orders and prohibitions. Only through tempering justice with mercy can management, training and command of the troops be smoothly guaranteed. As a result, the troops will unite as one and fight as one.

By comparing Swedish military thinking with *Sun Tzu's Art of War*, we find that there are many aspects for the two to confirm each other. Especially on the understanding of the basic characteristics of war, the emphasis of speed and local superiority in operations, the stress on the initiative of generals, and the stress on changing

strategies and tactics in accordance with the enemy situation, did Sun Tzu and Swedish statesmen such as Gustavus Adolphus and Charles XI follow the same beat and rhythm.

Needless to say, there are some differences. For example, unlike Swedish statesmen, Sun Tzu did not place an emphasis on offensives. Charles XI advocated defeating the enemy totally on the battlefield through offensives, and the Swedish field manual also mentioned that “decisive success can only be achieved by offensive action”. Although Sun Tzu did talk about offensives, he did not give them top priority. The most ideal victory in Sun Tzu’s mind is a complete victory under the precondition of securing oneself. According to Sun Tzu, there are many approaches to victory, and the best one is to subdue the enemy through political, diplomatic and other non-military means, while attacking by force is not the first choice.

This difference between Swedish military thinking and Sun Tzu’s thoughts might originate from different geopolitical conditions, and can also be understood as a difference in the orientation of cultural and traditional values and in the way of thinking. But also in this area we can find similarities in thinking. As an example, Charles XI was very much aware of the dangers in starting a war: “It is easy to start a war, but how it ends is in the hands of God.” War in his eyes was only the last resort when everything else had failed.

Another example is that the Swedish field manual stipulates “lack of intelligence must not delay an attack” and “not acting is a greater fault by a commander than choosing the wrong means”. By contrast, Sun Tzu thought that getting to know the conditions of both the enemy and oneself is the prerequisite to winning victory. He

said, “Know the enemy and know yourself, and you can fight a hundred battles with no danger of defeat. When you are ignorant of yourself but know the enemy, or when you are ignorant of the enemy but know yourself, your chances of winning and losing are equal. If you are ignorant both of your enemy and of yourself, you are sure to be defeated in every battle.” Therefore, generals must make a judgment and decide on the strategy and tactic on the basis of fully knowing the enemy situation. Sun Tzu also argued that in order to obtain knowledge about the enemy situation, generals should observe carefully, be experts on various reconnaissance methods, and make use of spies.

The last chapter of *Sun Tzu’s Art of War* focuses on the issue of the “use of spies”. Obviously, there is a difference between Sun Tzu’s great emphasis on knowing the enemy situation and Swedish theory of placing offensives above everything else. In war guidance, how to seek a balance between knowing the enemy situation in detail and as correctly as possible taking decisive actions is an issue worth earnest research.

Conclusion

Although there are differences between Swedish military thinking and Sun Tzu’s thoughts, generally speaking, the views confirming each other are greater than the differences. The fundamental reason why the two echo each other over a distance in history is that, *Sun Tzu’s Art of War* is a military theoretical classic rich in philosophy. It deeply considers the nature of war and summarizes the general laws in war guidance. Its value has transcended the bounds of time and space, cannot only apply to guiding a war in the cold arms era

of more than two thousand years ago in China, but also apply to various wars at all times and in all countries. Put in another way, the war practices in different eras in countries all over the world have proven the rationality and scientific approach of the basic thoughts in *Sun Tzu's Art of War*. Hence, the many thoughts of Sun Tzu have remained up to the present day to be golden rules and precious precepts for us to understand and guide a war. Among them are:

War is a matter of vital importance to the state; a matter of life and death and the road either to survival or to ruin. Hence, it is imperative that it be thoroughly studied.

To subdue the enemy without fighting is the supreme excellence.

The best policy in war is to attack the enemy's strategy. The second best way is to disrupt his alliances through diplomatic means. The next best method is to attack his army in the field. The worst policy is to attack walled cities.

The skilful warriors first made themselves invincible and then awaited the enemy's moment of vulnerability.

If not in the interests of the state, do not act. If you are not sure of success, do not use troops. If you are not in danger, do not fight a battle.

What is valued in war is a quick victory, not prolonged operations.

Know the enemy and know yourself, and you can fight a hundred battles with no danger of defeat.

Du Mu (803–852 AD), a well-known scholar in China's Tang Dynasty, commented: "Su Wu wrote thirteen chapters on the art of war. In the one thousand years after Sun Wu's death, the activities of those engaged in warfare, whether being successful

or failed, have precisely accorded with and molded to what Sun Wu wrote, and there is hardly any difference."¹ His comments vividly illustrate the universality of Sun Tzu's military theory. The British military historian B.H. Liddell Hart (1895–1970) said, "In that one short book was embodied almost as much about the fundamentals of strategy and tactics as I had covered in more than twenty books."² This is not only in praise of Sun Tzu, but also an affirmation of the founding position of *Sun Tzu's Art of War* in the field of military theories.

Of course, there are some limitations in the arguments in *Sun Tzu's Art of War*. For example, his exposition on specific terrains and ways of observing the enemy situation is not applicable to the present. However, small blemishes cannot obscure its brilliance as a classic on military theories.

When it comes to answering the question asked at the beginning of this paper; is it worthwhile studying Sun Tzu in today's war academies, the answer is obvious. Yes it is.

Karlis Neretnieks is Major General, former President of the Swedish National Defence College and a fellow of the Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences.

Shou Xiaosong is Major General and Director of the War Theories and Strategic Studies Department of the Academy of Military Science in China.

* This article has previously been published at the Academy of Military Science in China. As the article was published in Chinese and the subject is believed to be of an interest to our readers, an exception has been from the rule of only including first-time material.

Noter

1. Annotations to Tzu, Sun: *A Collection of Fanchuan*.
2. Preface to Samuel Griffith's translation of *Sun Tzu's Art of War*.