Combating Asymmetric Threats: The Interplay of Offense and Defense

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Abstract: The overarching objective of this analysis is to examine the ways and means by which the United States could take the asymmetric battle-space and win against the ever-changing array of threats posed by nation-states and non-state actors. Today's security challenges are predominantly hybrids: offense and defense; symmetric and asymmetric; synchronous and asynchronous; regular and irregular; geographically-focused and globally-ubiquitous. This reality requires multi-dimensional thinking, nuanced approaches, and nimble, decisive execution guided by a new strategic paradigm. Fighting on the enemy's terms, scoring short-term wins at unjustifiably high costs in lives, treasure and lost opportunities is simply unacceptable.

Offense and defense are inherent in the very nature of war. Indeed, they are intrinsic to any human interaction—be it sports, business, politics, tradecraft, or statecraft. While often presented as polar opposites, offense and defense constitute the essential duality that defines all contests—whether of wits, arms, or physical prowess. This duality was recognized five millennia ago by the Chinese warrior-philosopher Sun Tzu.

The Dynamics of Offense and Defense

Sun Tzu spoke of offense and defense as two primordial forces—an inextricably linked *yin* and *yang*—one flowing into and giving rise to the other. He also spoke of *cheng*, the "ordinary force"—symmetric, conventional, predictable, and plodding; and *chi*, the "extraordinary force"—asymmetric, unorthodox, fluid, agile,

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and lightning-fast. Their infinitely varying compositions keep the opponent off balance, while allowing the more talented practitioner to accomplish his strategic aims with minimal cost in blood and treasure. Fixation on either one at the expense of the other leads to "disharmony" and, thereby, prolongs the confrontation and risks defeat. The skillful combination of these forces, in contrast, opens up boundless possibilities. It is, therefore, the true essence of the art of war:

> There are only five notes in the musical scale, but their variations are so many that they cannot all be heard. There are only five basic colors, but their variations are so many that they cannot all be seen. There are only five basic flavors, but their variations are so many that they cannot all be tasted. There are only two kinds of battle, but the variations of the ordinary and the extraordinary are endless. They give rise to each other, like a circle without a beginning or an end - who could exhaust them all?[1]

While Sun Tzu sometimes is associated with an "Oriental" approach to warfare, his precepts transcend time and space. Their universal applicability was first recognized in Europe, in the wake of the merciless carnage of World War I, where an entire generation pitted mass and élan in futile attempts to overcome the unanticipated asymmetry generated by industrial-age killing machines: long-range, heavy artillery, armor, poison gas, portable machine guns, airplanes, and submarines. Indeed, one of Britain's most prominent military writers, Sir Basil H. Liddell Hart, penned the seminal *Strategy*—indicting what he called "the cult of the offense"—upon his return from the blood-soaked trenches of Verdun. Borrowing liberally from the ancient Chinese text, Liddell Hart became an early advocate of asymmetry and "the indirect approach," aimed at dislocating and, thereby, defeating the enemy through speed, mobility, stealth, maneuver, and surprise. It took another 50 years and the human, societal and political toll of the Vietnam War for these ideas to gain traction in America's military academies, war colleges and business schools.

Nonetheless, the traditional American way of war remains anchored in the belief that battles are won by mass and offensive action. Offense is enshrined among the Principles of War in the hierarchy defined in *Army Field Manual FM-3-0 - Military Operations*.[2] Defense, in contrast, is deemed primarily a supporting function, designed to protect a position, preserve combat power, or await relief. Wars are won—or brought to an uneasy stalemate, as in Korea—by the offense, preferably executed by an overwhelming force. As General George S. Patton famously observed in 1944: "the object of war is not to die for your country but to make the other bastard die for his." This is a far cry from Liddell Hart's (and Sun Tzu's) view that "the object of war is to achieve a better peace, even if only from your own perspective."

February 28, 2013 marked the 22nd anniversary of Operation Desert Storm. For all but its veterans, it was merely a date on the calendar. Likewise, the

[1] Sun Tzu, in Ralph D. Sawyer, tr., *The Art of War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), p. 187.

[2] In order, the Eight Principles of War are: mass, objective, offensive, surprise, economy of force, maneuver, unity of command, and security.