

Strategic Stones and the Path Ahead

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The Department of Defense published its strategic guidance, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, in January 2012, detailing missions and principles that will guide the development and employment of Joint Force 2020. This document clearly articulated a shift toward the Pacific Theater and the potential need to challenge emerging Chinese military force and competing economic interests. The purpose of this article is to explore the ramifications of this strategic shift and the potential military interactions resident in any such struggle.

A clash between an American-led coalition and the Chinese state would be a contest of differing military philosophies representing contrasting military histories and cultural experiences. To gain insight into the nature of these differences, I will contrast board games associated with each culture. In the case of the Western system, I'll use chess as a conflict surrogate to explore selected principles of war. On the Eastern side, the game of Wei Ch'i, or Go in the Japanese experience, will be used to illuminate the concepts of the Maoist-centric system and its evolving employment template. Finally, I'll explore the potential influence these operational approaches may have on the formulation of future strategies.

The nine principles of war have long provided a backdrop against which to conduct

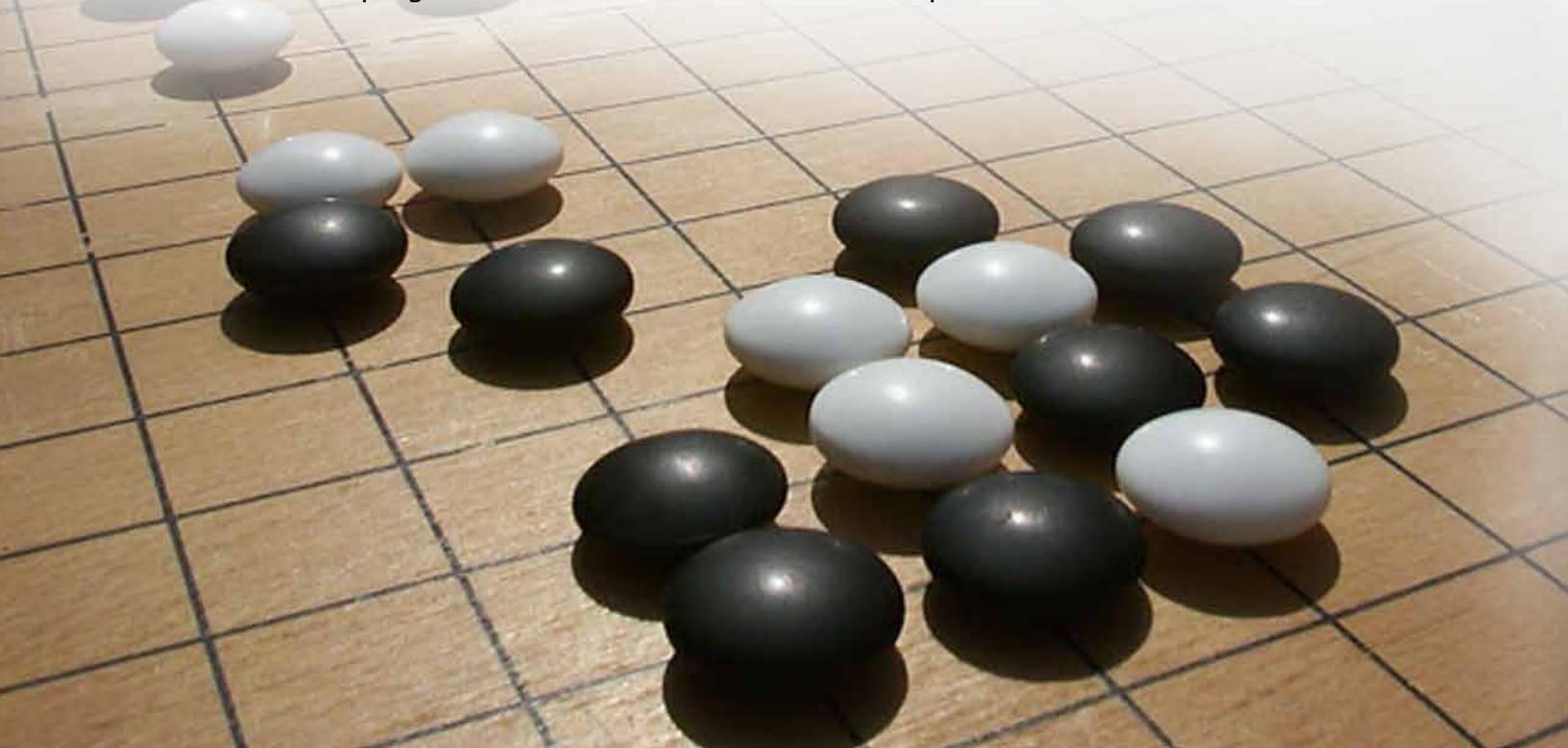
campaign analysis and doctrinal review. The first of these is that the *objective* and each game system have a unique approach as to what goals are sought during the contest. The remaining eight principles of war lend themselves to groupings in similar functional sets. *Offense, maneuver, mass* and *surprise* can be thought of as principles facilitating the imposition of our will on the enemy. Conversely, *simplicity, unity of command, economy of force* and *security* are principles that retain our freedom of action in the face of enemy action and the natural friction arising from the inherent uncertainty associated with any contest between competing endstates and wills.

I'll focus on offense, maneuver and mass since they provide the most insight in opposing defeat mechanisms and operational design.

Chess: the Western system

Capturing the opponent's king in chess becomes the overriding objective to which all other activity leads.¹ It is interesting that this objective tends to set a material-based theme for many key elements and techniques within the game. The overarching strategy resolves around gaining positional or material advantages to obtain the goal.

Fred Reinfeld in his discussion of chess tactics emphasizes an offensive theme in



generating threats to achieve tactical goals. He outlines imposing our will on the opponent, hitting them where they are weak and gaining material advantage to break down the opponent's defenses.² Within the context of game combinations, a series of related moves aimed at gaining material or positional advantage play an important role in executing the offense. These combinations become the core of rapid rearrangement of forces on the board and take on a blitzkrieg-like character as the battle ebbs and flows.

One final observation that tends to characterize chess is that each type of piece is unique and varying in its abilities to move and capture. The stronger the piece's combat value, the more valuable its relative worth. This tends to make combinations and exchanges take on a material focus, reinforcing attrition orientation.

Maneuver alters the relative combat power of military forces in relation to one another. It becomes the vehicle by which friendly forces achieve a positional advantage and is often achieved by effective firepower.³ In chess, the masters key in on the relationship between good position on the board and how such an advantage enhances the striking power of pieces relative to your opponent. For instance, Reinfeld details the concepts of "good squares" and "fighting for the center" as guideposts to improving your position on the board and enhancing

offensive power. Two specific examples he uses are placing your rooks on open files where they can dominate an entire row, and getting your bishops to diagonals where their movement characteristics can similarly dominate.⁴ By controlling the center of the board, you are able to maximize the hitting power of your pieces. It follows as no surprise that so much of chess literature is dominated by discussions of controlling this area during the game's opening moves.

The ability to mass combat power, in terms of material and firepower, at the decisive time and place has long been a key defeat mechanism in doctrinal thought around the world. This concept translates well to the chessboard, as pieces maneuver against weakness to develop additional advantage. Along these lines, Reinfeld noted that the ability to gain material advantage in one area leads to greater material advantage.⁵

During the Cold War, the entire Soviet military system ashore was obsessed with developing operational advantages in speed and mass. It is interesting to note that during this same timeframe, the Soviet Union dominated the world chess ranking in international competition.

The goal here has not been to teach the game of chess but rather to demonstrate how chess has captured the operational essence of many of the key combat concepts articulated in Western military tradition. In the context of chess, this tradition can be thought of as functioning under a rapidly



Principle of war	Chess	Wei Ch'i / Go
Objective	Capture king; oriented on opposing force	Gain most territory; space- or resource-oriented
Offensive	Attack weakness to gain material or positional advantage	Control base areas, extend deliberately toward strength; strategic not tactical threats
Mass / concentration	Combine striking power to a single area to overwhelm defense	Combine striking power from multiple directions to encircle defense
Maneuver / mobility	Use movement of pieces to dominate rows and diagonals; use combinations to gain advantage in materiel or position; rapid and changing forces; operate on interior lines by controlling the board center	Methodical, step-by-step extensions from bases; exploit tempo in one area for exchange in another; complicate control by operating from many directions; operate on external lines

Table 1. Game concepts and the principles of war.

changing operational landscape, controlling the center as key terrain and maintaining orientation on the opposing force with the ultimate goal of removing its central piece, the king.

Wei Ch'i/Go: the Eastern system

The objective in Wei Ch'i is to control territory. To accomplish this, each player sequentially places control markers, referred to as *stones*, on the intersections of the board grid. Players capture opposing stones by surrounding them and cutting off any open intersection points to the stone or a group. Therefore, by walling off areas and encircling enemy stones, the game progresses until all space is controlled. All stones have the same characteristics of play, so only their position on the board determines their relative value. In this regard, the game is comparable to economic competition for scarce resources (in this case terrain) as well as a model of armed conflict.

The game reflects the combined need for blending offensive and defensive strategies at different parts of the board simultaneously. Unlike chess – in which players attempt to dominate the center of the playing area – the opening of a Wei Ch'i game is dominated on the edges and corners. Iwamoto Kaoru, the Japanese nine-dan Go master, in his discussions on game strategy details the importance and techniques for controlling the corners to establish base

areas. This approach, referred to as *shimari* in game lexicon, allows players to construct areas from which to strike on a larger scale to the center of the board.⁶

In Mao's writing, we find direct parallels in his approach to resisting Japanese operations in China. He details his approach as operating on exterior lines corresponding to the edge of the board, establishing bases as in *shimari* and finally extending the war to other areas.⁷ These are all solid revolutionary techniques directly reflected in the Wei Ch'i mechanics of game play.

Offensive operations in the game context extend beyond base areas to capture and contest your opponent's territory. Kaoru offers the Go adage of "stay away from thickness" as one signpost to extending control on the board. He recommends a step-by-step approach when closing on your opponent. This technique ultimately leads to encirclement and capture of enemy stones, resulting in the addition of territory.

The idea of avoiding strength and exploiting weakness is not new in the conflict of arms, but does it have relevance as a tendency in the Eastern military approach? In GEN Vo Nguyen Giap's writing, we see close linkage in these game concepts to his reflections on how he conducted the war in Vietnam. He discusses the development of the opponent's weakness in operational methods and how he used a "step-by-step" approach to secure victory.⁸ His observations continue on how "tight encirclement" played a key

role in cutting off reinforcement and ensuring annihilation of the enemy to secure all the territory of South Vietnam.⁹ Wei Ch'i references are clearly articulated as the general discusses his operational methods.

The Maoist view of mass, like in Wei Ch'i, takes on a subtle difference when contrasted with its Western counterpart. In chess, committing more pieces to the exchange or fight adds strength. On the Wei Ch'i board, the object is control with just enough force, but not massing your stones so closely they can't influence more area adjacent to them. In the Western tradition, force is massed to conduct operations and achieve an objective. By contrast, in the Wei Ch'i scheme, encirclement is achieved through coordinated action of different groups from dispersed areas on the same objective.¹⁰

Giap makes strong references to the correlation of forces as a prelude to developing the strength needed to overwhelm South Vietnam. He links the proper use of space with the refined mobility of the road network to define aimpoints that allowed his forces to achieve the concentration needed to win.¹¹

Finally, Kaoru introduces a tactical scheme known as *kakari* designed to challenge base areas your opponent uses to extend his territorial holdings. Minimum stones are played to force a disproportional defensive commitment of resources. The intent here is not to overwhelm or defeat the opposing base but rather focus your opponent on this area of the board and in so doing gain freedom of action elsewhere.¹² This is an important paradigm from which to assess the Chinese build-up of military power.

Influence of approaches on strategy

Table 1 summarizes the two approaches to conflict as represented in the differing game systems. The table also summarizes the extent to which these abstractions capture the essence of regionalized military thought, contrasted against the principles of war, on either side of the Golden Meridian.

With these opposing approaches to conflict as a frame of reference, what would an expansionist strategy look like emanating from China? The first important observation is

that China has already played some of the "strategic stones" on the geopolitical Wei Ch'i board.

China will seek to disrupt the adverse influence of a Western maritime coalition by attacking the weakest link within the Mao precept of conserving one's own strength and destroying the enemy.¹³ This leads me to believe that a future conflict in the Pacific will take on more of the feel of the struggle between France and England in the 18th Century than a replay of Japanese expansion in World War II. It is unlikely that the newly emerging surface forces of the Chinese navy will actively seek engagements beyond the Near Sea. They will remain in play as a classic Colbett "fleet-in-being" to complicate the effective use of our sea-based naval power.

China's overarching strategy will be to hold along its eastern seaboard while expanding and encircling to the east and south. This observation is consistent with Chinese efforts to build a maritime access-denial apparatus to deter Western incursion along their coast. While the United States focuses on securing its maritime base in the Pacific, the Chinese will be free to expand on the other side of the "Wei Ch'i board."

One part of the "board" involves China's near neighbors. The Soviet Union's collapse resulted in the balkanization of the center of Mackinder's Heartland.¹⁴ From the Caspian Sea to their border with China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan emerged from the collective protection of the former Soviet state as resource-rich nations with limited military means. Given the general difficulties experienced in U.S. relations with Afghanistan and Pakistan, coupled with a long-running hostility toward Iran, our position on that side of the Wei Ch'i board is weak.

If we realize that the opening rounds of the game are underway – as represented by Chinese regional infrastructure investments in roads and pipelines – China's moves fall into a deliberate long-range strategy almost incomprehensible to the Western mindset.¹⁵ From a Wei Ch'i viewpoint, in which the competition for limited resources or space is the struggle's essence, these economic

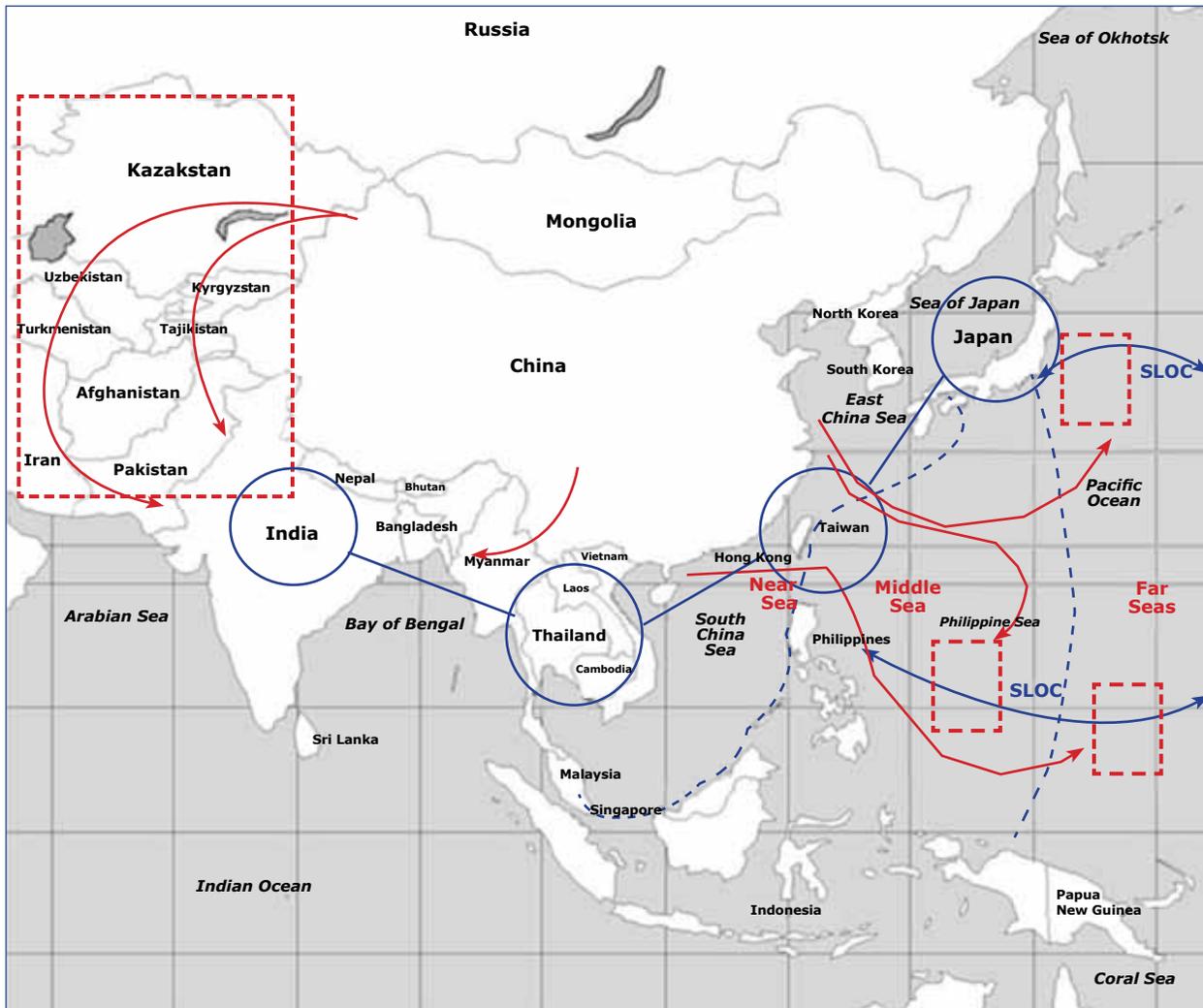


Figure 1. From a Wei Ch'i viewpoint, in which the competition for limited resources or space is the struggle's essence, economic goals play within a deliberate framework of expansion aimed at India's potential encirclement. When Chinese economic and military ties to Myanmar become part of the landscape, the threat becomes real, giving those on the subcontinent reason to pause and question historic and current Western commitment to the region as a trading partner and coalition member.

stones play within a deliberate framework of expansion aimed at the potential encirclement of India. When Chinese economic and military ties to Myanmar become part of the landscape, the threat becomes real, giving those on the subcontinent reason to pause and question historic and current Western commitment to the region as a trading partner and coalition member. (Figure 1.)

National power remains built on a triad of economic strength, military power and political engagement. Half a century of growth in what President Dwight D. Eisenhower termed the military-industrial

complex has slanted relationships among these three elements and left the United States in a position unsustainable in any major prolonged struggle. Our chess-like focus on military material – the playing pieces, if you will – has resulted in a myopic strategic vision that has underplayed the role of the economy and international affairs in building a construct to advance American interests around the globe. When contrasted with the more subtle Wei Ch'i approach to strategy, we see a China aggressively pursuing raw materials, expanding its industrial strength, building up its armed forces and converting these advantages into international capital in their

negotiations with other states. This balanced Eastern approach has inherent Daoism overtones, which should not come as a surprise in our assessment of Chinese strategic direction.

In the struggle between Britain and France in the 18th Century, Pitt's Plan emerged as a strategic blueprint for how a maritime power could challenge a continental opponent. The tenets of this approach have strong implications for the Armor force, as they chart a path in the post-war-on-terrorism world. The main pillars of this approach are maintaining maritime superiority; building a coalition partner on the continent; and retaining the strategic flexibility to challenge overseas holdings. It is incumbent on the Army as the nation's premier land-power proponent to retain the capability to develop and lead any future continental coalition.

This will demand the progressive modernization of brigade combat teams capable of engaging across the full continuum of conflict, retaining the strategic mobility to be at the point of conflict and employing a range of lethal firepower to dominate the battlefield. The armored brigade combat team will hold center stage in the formulation and development of coalition capabilities through peacetime engagement in country-to-country exercises and exchanges. The inherent capability of the Armor force given its firepower, survivability and mobility make it well suited to challenging any opponent along the steppes of the global heartland. These powerful combined-arms organizations will add stability and confidence to any potential coalition partner as they assess their options in the future alignment of nation states.

The increasing pace of China's emergence on the geopolitical stage as a true peer-competitor should give us all pause as we reconstitute the Armor force in the next decade. While many of the capabilities that established this force as a leader in land combat remain valid, increasing inherent ability to deploy and sustain Armor in austere regions around the globe must receive increased attention. Our current strategic shift to the Pacific falls short as a counterforce or deterrent strategy along the rimlands of central Asia when viewed in light of Wei Ch'i principles. Closing these gaps will hinge heavily on the extent to which

the Armor force can assume the role as leader of the coalition that opposes hostile moves emanating from the Middle Kingdom.



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Notes

¹ Dupuy and Dupuy, *Military Heritage of America*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1956.

² Reinfeld, Fred, *The Complete Chess Player*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953.

³ Dupuy.

⁴ Reinfeld.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Koaru, Iwamoto, CPT, *Go for Beginners*, Tokyo: The Ishi Press, Inc., 1972.

⁷ Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1961.

⁸ Giap, Vo Nguyen, *How We Won The War*, Philadelphia, PA: RECON Publications, 1976.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Boorman, Scott, *The Protracted Game, a Wei Ch'i Interpretation of Maoist Revolutionary Strategy*, Oxford University Press, 1969.

¹¹ Giap.

¹² Koaru.

¹³ Mao.

¹⁴ **Editor's note:** This refers to an article titled "The Geographical Pivot of History" by Halford John Mackinder, submitted in 1904 to the Royal Geographical Society advancing his Heartland Theory. According to Mackinder, the Earth's land surface was divisible into the *world island*, comprising Europe, Asia and Africa; the *offshore islands*, including the British Isles and the islands of Japan; and the *outlying islands*, including the continents of North America, South America and Australia. The heartland lay at the center of the world island, stretching from the Volga River to the Yangtze River and from the Himalayas to the Arctic.

¹⁵ Kaplan, Robert, *The Revenge of Geography*, New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2012.