



## The Art of Failure? A Sun-Tzuian Critique of Russia's War Strategy in Ukraine

Eduard Vicuna, DBA, MPR  
De La Salle University  
Eduard\_Vicuna@dlsu.edu.ph

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70922/rvq2ef61>

Copyeditor: ANA MARIE BAUTISTA

[Submit to this journal](#) ↗

[Other related articles](#) ↗

Announcements

[Other PUP Journals](#) ↗

Other citation formats:

### Article History:


Received: May 9, 2025  
Accepted: July 28, 2025  
Revised: September 30, 2025

### How to Cite this paper:

Vicuna, Eduard. "The Art of Failure? A Sun-Tzuian Critique of Russia's War Strategy in Ukraine." *Mabini Review* 16, no. 1 (2026): 17–47.  
<https://doi.org/10.70922/rvq2ef61>.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [mabinireview@pup.edu.ph](mailto:mabinireview@pup.edu.ph).

# The Art of Failure? A Sun-Tzuian Critique of Russia's War Strategy in Ukraine

Eduard Vicuna, DBA, MPR   
De La Salle University  
[Eduard\\_Vicuna@dlsu.edu.ph](mailto:Eduard_Vicuna@dlsu.edu.ph)

## Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of Russian military strategy in the Ukraine war through the lens of Sun-Tzu's strategic philosophy. Grounded in Sun-Tzu's principles of warfare, the study evaluates Russian strategy using five key elements: Leader Values, People's Belief, Mitigation, Environment, and Information. Employing a qualitative methodology, the research analyzes military decisions and tactics based on these strategic dimensions. Findings indicate that while Russia initially relied on deception and overwhelming force, its failure to achieve a swift victory stemmed from flawed planning, underestimated Ukrainian resistance, and logistical challenges. The study highlights the critical role of intelligence, adaptability, and psychological warfare, emphasizing the impact of leadership perception and civilian morale on military success. Furthermore, the research underscores the significance of terrain, information warfare, and adaptive countermeasures in shaping conflict outcomes. The findings suggest that Russia's strategic misalignment with Sun-Tzu's principles—particularly regarding prolonged engagement and failure to secure rapid strategic objectives—contributed to its operational setbacks. This study concludes that classical military philosophy remains highly relevant in contemporary warfare, providing insights into strategic decision-making. It recommends that military planners integrate Sun-Tzu's principles of intelligence, flexibility, and psychological operations to enhance strategic effectiveness in modern conflicts.

**Keywords:** information warfare, military tactics, Russia, Sun-Tzu, Strategy, Ukraine War

## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores how Sun-Tzu's strategic philosophy provides valuable insights into the actions of the Russian leadership and their military during the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Using *The Art of War* as a foundation, this qualitative strategy analysis engages with Sun-Tzu's teachings to critically examine the strategic dynamics of the conflict. By applying a philosophical and

military critique, this study highlights the relevance of his principles in modern warfare.

Sun-Tzu has been synonymous with strategy since he wrote his seminal work over 2,500 years ago. His Thirteen Chapters have influenced military tactics, business strategy, and leadership worldwide. His core philosophy emphasizes intelligence, deception, adaptability, and psychological warfare—elements that remain highly relevant in contemporary conflicts, including the Russia-Ukraine war.

By analyzing the Russia-Ukraine war through Sun-Tzu's strategic lens, this paper demonstrates that victory is not solely determined by military size but by intelligence, adaptability, leadership, and psychological advantage. Ukraine's ability to exploit Russia's weaknesses reflects Sun-Tzu's timeless wisdom. Meanwhile, Russia's challenges serve as a cautionary example of how misjudging an opponent and failing to adapt can lead to prolonged conflict and strategic setbacks.

The journals authored by Hlosek,<sup>1</sup> Sweitzer,<sup>2</sup> and Cimbala,<sup>3</sup> examined the early stages of the Ukraine-Russia conflict, particularly focusing on the annexation of Crimea. This event served as a strategic blueprint for President Putin's subsequent actions in 2022. These works collectively highlight the relevance of Sun Tzu's principles in analyzing the conflict, offering a theoretical lens through which the war's dynamics can be understood. The scope of this paper extends from the onset of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine by Russia through to developments in 2024. The scope tackles the Russian strategy lens. Ukraine would be another paper in focus to understand more about how they fare with Russia's strategy. More recent scholarship, such as Wei's journal, provides insight into contemporary perspectives on the war, especially regarding President Zelensky's evolving role and the challenges he faces as the conflict endures. These journals offer a broader context that complements, but goes beyond, the discussions presented in this paper.

---

1 Alexander George Hlosek, "Russo-Ukrainian war through the lens of Sun Tzu," *International Security Studies* (2024).

2 C. Sweitzer, "Russo-Ukrainian war through the lens of Sun Tzu," *Marine Corps Combat Development Command* (2018).

3 Stephen J. Cimbala, "Sun Tzu and Salami Tactics? Vladimir Putin and Military Persuasion in Ukraine, 21 February–18 March 2014," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* (2014).

4 Chunjuan Nancy Wei, "No Angel': Sun Tzu on the Russia-Ukraine War and Zelensky's Quagmire," *International Journal for Peace and Public Leadership* (2025).

Sun-Tzu's teachings tell us about how Eastern thinking has a lot of influences in Strategy. Sun-Tzu, who lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> BC, was one of the first authors of strategy in Asia. Although there were other military strategists before him, there is no doubt that the written text has been used in the military and in business, as well as for personal use of strategy as a guide. His relevance stands the test of time and has been a benchmark in all military strategies and tactics. His influences are carried not only by Eastern but also by Western thinkers using his teaching. Western thinkers compare their strategies from Clausewitz as another form or reference. There will be various relevant instances and compare it with the framework. There will be samples as part of the scope limitation.

#### a. Sun Tzu ideas relative to Information

Beyond military strategy, Sun-Tzu's work has been widely interpreted and adapted into various domains. Some scholars apply his teachings to business strategy,<sup>5</sup> while others integrate his principles into broader advisory frameworks,<sup>6</sup> Authors often provide fresh perspectives on The Art of War, expanding its relevance to leadership, military theory, and modern strategic thinking.<sup>7</sup> Sun-Tzu is frequently compared to other strategic thinkers, including Carl von Clausewitz, Miyamoto Musashi, Marcus Aurelius, and Niccolò Machiavelli.<sup>8</sup> Despite their differing contexts, these thinkers share a common emphasis on the philosophy of strategy and warfare.

#### b. Russian-Ukraine War within the Environmental Battlefield

##### *Leader Values according to Putin*

To understand the strategic decisions of Russia, it is essential to analyze its leader, Vladimir Putin. As one of the longest-serving leaders in modern history, Putin has maintained his grip on power since the early 2000s. He achieved this by removing term limits from Russian law and manipulating elections in his favor. Additionally, he has secured the backing of oligarchs, who benefit from

---

5 Mark McNeilly, *Sun Tzu and the Art of Business: Six Strategic Principles for Managers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

6 Kuan Feng, "A Study of Sun Tzu's Philosophical Thought on the Military," *Chinese Studies in Philosophy*, (1971): 116–57.

7 Umas Sharma, *In Quest of Peace: Indian Culture Shows the Path – Sun Tzu Response to Terrorism* (New Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, 2006).

8 Michael I. Handel, *Sun Tzu and Clausewitz: The Art of War and On War Compared* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Professional Readings in Military Strategy, 1991).

monopolized industries in exchange for their political and financial support.<sup>9</sup> This symbiotic relationship between Putin and Russia's elite has reinforced his authority, allowing him to govern with minimal resistance.

Putin's leadership is characterized by authoritarianism, suppression of dissent, and consolidation of power. Opposition candidates who pose a threat to his rule have been systematically undermined—either through electoral manipulation, political persecution, or, in extreme cases, elimination.<sup>10</sup> His government actively suppresses internal resistance and retaliates against foreign critics, solidifying Russia's position as an autocratic state.

### *Philosophical view of People's Belief and Alignment in war*

The Russia-Ukraine war was an unprovoked act of aggression.<sup>11</sup> While multiple factors contributed to Putin's decision to invade, one of the primary motivations was his vision of restoring the Soviet Union's former territorial unity.<sup>12</sup> The Russian army crossed Ukraine's border in February 2022, expecting a swift victory within weeks. However, three years into the conflict, Russia has only managed to occupy approximately 20% of Ukraine. The failure to achieve rapid success highlights the miscalculations in Russia's strategy and the resilience of Ukraine's defense.

From Sun-Tzu's perspective, war is not merely about brute force but about strategy, intelligence, and adaptability. His philosophy suggests that successful warfare is grounded in understanding the motivations and morale of both one's own people and the enemy. The alignment of a nation's leadership with its people's beliefs is a decisive factor in sustaining war efforts. In the case of Ukraine, national unity and the will to resist have been pivotal in countering Russia's military superiority. Conversely, within Russia, the war has led to

---

9 Onur Kemal Tosun and Arman Eshraghi, "Corporate Decisions in Times of War: Evidence from the Russia-Ukraine Conflict," *Finance Research Letters* (2022).

10 Demetrius Floudas, "'Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Atomic Warfare but Were Afraid to Ask: Nuclear Strategy in the Ukraine War Era,'" lecture, University of Cambridge, February 29, 2024, <https://talks.cam.ac.uk/talk/index/212134>. Artem Patalakh, "On the Possible Foreign Policy of the Post-Putin Russia: The Case of Alexei Navalny's Viewpoints on Foreign Affairs," *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 12, no. 4 (2018): 9-31.

11 Siobhan Kattago, "The Russia-Ukraine War and the Sediments of Time," *Studia Philosophica Estonica* 17 (August 22, 2024): 120–33, <https://ojs.utlib.ee/index.php/spe/article/view/24407>.

12 Fyodor Lukyanov, "Putin's Russia: The Quest for a New Place," *Social Research* 76, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 117–50, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40972141>.

internal dissent, economic sanctions, and strained geopolitical alliances, all of which influence the war's trajectory.

### *Mitigations on the Effects of the war*

The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war extends far beyond the battlefield, affecting global economies, alliances, and information warfare. Understanding these broader consequences provides a more comprehensive view of the war's reach and how nations mitigate its effects. One critical aspect is the role of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his leadership values, which have significantly shaped Ukraine's resistance and international support.<sup>13</sup> His ability to rally both domestic and global backing has been instrumental in Ukraine's continued defense efforts. Meanwhile, Russia has faced severe economic consequences due to Western sanctions, which have led to the exodus of multinational companies and economic contraction.<sup>14</sup> These sanctions have restricted Russia's access to international markets, forcing it to sell oil at prices below global market rates and adjust trade policies, including accepting payments in Russian rubles instead of U.S. dollars.

The global impact of the war is undeniable, with disruptions in supply chains, energy markets, and regional security policies.<sup>15</sup> Russia's aggressive actions have not only affected Ukraine but have also reshaped the world order, prompting nations to reconsider their defense strategies and economic dependencies. Engaging with Sun-Tzu's philosophy provides valuable insights into these developments. His emphasis on strategic adaptability, deception, and information control is evident in both Ukraine's resilience and Russia's efforts to navigate economic and diplomatic challenges. The war's broader effects reinforce the importance of understanding the multi-dimensional nature of modern conflicts, where military operations are intertwined with economic warfare, information battles, and global political shifts.

---

13 Chidinma P. Ukeachusim, "Russia-Ukraine War: Understanding and Responding to Wars and Rumours of Wars as ἀρχὴ ὁδίνων," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 79, no. 4 (2023): a8717, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i4.8717>. Cyril Hovorun, "War and Autocephaly in Ukraine," *Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal* 7 (2020): 1-25, [https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo\\_fac/371](https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac/371).

14 Zaghum Umar et al., "The Impact of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict on the Connectedness of Financial Markets," *Finance Research Letters* 48 (August 2022): 102976, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.frl.2022.102976>.

15 Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, "Ukraine War: A War of Languages and Bodies," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 78, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.8005>.

## Objectives of the Study

This paper addressed the main problem: How effective and coherent is the Russian military strategy in its war against Ukraine if viewed through the lens of Sun Tzu's principles of warfare? This main problem was articulated by the following sub-problems: 1. How do Vladimir Putin's leadership values and strategic approach align with or diverge from Sun Tzu's principles of effective leadership in warfare? 2. How do the Russian population's beliefs, cultural values, and alignment with state narratives compare with Sun Tzu's teachings on deception, flexibility, and unity of purpose in warfare? 3. How have Russia's strategic adaptations and countermeasures during the conflict reflected Sun Tzu's principles of military strategy and warfare? 4. How can Sun Tzu's lessons on environmental factors in warfare be applied to understand the operational dynamics and fluidity of the Russia-Ukraine conflict within its unique geopolitical and military context? 5. How does Russia's use of public perception, information warfare, and propaganda align with Sun Tzu's principles on intelligence, deception, and psychological operations in warfare?

## Significance of the study

The significance of this study lies in its critical philosophical analysis of the Russian military strategy in the ongoing war against Ukraine. This is through the lens of Sun Tzu's principles of warfare. The research provides insight into how classical military theories and strategy apply to modern conflicts evaluating the coherence and effectiveness of Russia's strategic decisions.<sup>16</sup> It is relevant to military strategists, policymakers, and scholars as it explores the alignment or divergence of Russian leadership values from Sun Tzu's teachings, particularly in deception, adaptability, and public perception. Moreover, the research contributes to the broader discourse on warfare ethics, geopolitical strategy, and information warfare. Understanding these dynamics aids in comprehending Russia's actions, Ukraine's resistance, and the broader implications for global security. This study enhances our grasp of strategic military thought and its applicability in contemporary conflicts, helping future leaders navigate complex geopolitical landscapes.

---

16 Jennifer Leigh Bailey, "Constructing a Crisis: Putin, the West and War in Ukraine," *Etikk i praksis – Nordic Journal of Applied Ethics* 17, no. 1 (June 30, 2023): 99–101, <https://doi.org/10.5324/eip.v17i1.5032>.

## METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employed a qualitative case study design anchored in document analysis and hermeneutic critique. The case study focuses on Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2022–2024) as a contemporary conflict, while Sun-Tzu's *The Art of War* serves as the philosophical text for interpretive analysis.

Data sources consisted primarily of publicly available reports and analyses from reputable international outlets (e.g., CNN, MSNBC) supplemented by scholarly works on military strategy and the Russia-Ukraine war. Military events were selected based on three criteria: (1) their strategic significance in the progression of the war (e.g., attempted capture of Kyiv, occupation of border territories, use of drones and sanctions); (2) their illustration of a key strategic success or failure; and (3) their relevance to one or more of Sun-Tzu's principles. Each event was subjected to thematic mapping, linking it to one of Sun-Tzu's categories and then interpreting it hermeneutically in light of the philosopher's writings. This allowed historical tracing of how Russia's decisions aligned or diverged from classical strategy.

To bridge Sun-Tzu's ancient framework with modern analysis, the thirteen chapters were synthesized into five clusters: (1) *Leader Values*, (2) *Environment*, (3) *People's Belief and Alignment*, (4) *Mitigation of Internal and External Forces*, and (5) *Information*. The rationale for clustering lies in making Sun-Tzu's detailed but dispersed teachings more analytically manageable for modern warfare studies. For example, the chapters on estimations, waging war, planning offensives, and dispositions were grouped under *Leader Values* to reflect the centrality of leadership and planning. Conversely, the largest cluster, *Mitigation*, integrates multiple chapters on adaptation, combat, and power to emphasize Sun-Tzu's stress on flexibility and responsiveness. Table 1 presents the new cluster alongside the principles of Sun Tzu, while Figure 1 presents the Relational Elements Modern Strategy.

TABLE 1. *Art of War Chapter mapping for modern strategy*

New Cluster	Principles of Sun Tzu
Leader Values	Initial Estimations Waging War Planning Offensives Military Dispositions
Environment	Configuration of Terrains Nine Terrains
People's Belief and alignment	Maneuvering the Army

New Cluster	Principles of Sun Tzu
Mitigation of internal and external forces	Nine Changes Vacuity and Substance Military Combat Strategic Military Power Incendiary Attacks
Information	Employing Spies



Figure 1: Relational Elements Modern Strategy.

While this synthesis compresses some nuances, it provides a coherent relational framework that preserves the spirit of Sun-Tzu’s philosophy while making it applicable to modern conflicts. This combined approach ensures that the analysis is both grounded in contemporary evidence and faithful to the philosophical roots of Sun-Tzu’s strategic thought.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section critically evaluates Russia’s military strategy in the Ukraine war through the lens of Sun-Tzu’s strategic principles, focusing on five key dimensions: a) Leader Values, b) Environment, c) People’s Belief and Alignment / Maneuvering the Army, d) Mitigation of Internal and External Forces, and e) Information/Employing Spies. These categories provide a structured framework for assessing the coherence, adaptability, and overall effectiveness of Russian military operations.

## a. Leader Values

### 1. Russian Strategy under State importance

Understanding the war means understanding its leaders. Putin's leadership style is authoritarian.<sup>17</sup> He values staying in power, as he rigs Russian elections, changes presidential term limits, and intimidates or kills any opposition to his rule.<sup>18</sup> He also aims to unite the former Soviet Union by reclaiming breakaway countries, including Ukraine.<sup>19</sup>

Putin comes from the KGB and is a seasoned spy.<sup>20</sup> He planned the invasion of Ukraine by initiating a military buildup at the border in November 2020.<sup>21</sup> Putin understands the importance of waging war.<sup>22</sup> His preparations took place at the height of the pandemic, which did not stop him from moving into Ukraine.<sup>23</sup> His leadership values align with Sun Tzu's recommendations, emphasizing planning and tactical deployment.

#### *How Effective and Coherent is this Strategy under Sun-Tzu's State importance?*

Putin's actions against another sovereign country reveal his intent and the state's priority in taking over another nation. This decision is not taken lightly; it requires buy-in from both the military and the populace. Putin must convince them of the necessity of moving into Ukraine and why invading is important.

---

17 Alison Rowley, *Putin Kitsch in America* (Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019). Kenneth Wilson, "Ruling Russia: Authoritarianism from the Revolution to Putin," *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 23, no. 6 (2018): 728–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2018.1449403>.

18 Samuel A. Greene and Graeme B. Robertson, *Putin v. the People: The Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

19 Robert E. Neilson, *Sun Tzu and Information Warfare* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1997).

20 Dale R. Herspring, "Vladimir Putin: His Continuing Legacy," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 151–74, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2009.0000>.

21 Nicholas Ross Smith and Grant Dawson, "Mearsheimer, Realism, and the Ukraine War," *Analyse & Kritik* 44, no. 2 (2022): 315–28, <https://doi.org/10.1515/auk-2022-2023>.

22 Patalakh, "Foreign Policy of the Post-Putin Russia," 9–31.

23 Vittorio Bufacchi, "War Crimes in Ukraine: Is Putin Responsible?" *Journal of Political Power*, published online July 26, 2022, pp. 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2022.2105495>.

Sun-Tzu would consider this an essential first move, as it sets the tone for what follows. This is an effective way to initiate a strategy.

Any form of preparation driven by a leader's values distinguishes one leader from another. This is where the difference between victory and defeat emerges. We contemplate life and death not only in terms of a leader's mindset but also in the state of mind of an entire nation. Leadership values the lives of its people, whether in defense of their country or as an aggressor. Each leader must persuade their constituents to accept their vision—even to the extent of sacrificing their lives for the nation. This is what makes leadership crucial, as Sun Tzu emphasizes.

## 2. Russian Strategy under Military

Chapter Two discusses how generals employ the military and prepare for war. In ancient times, the military was under the direct command of the state and its ruler. In modern times, however, the military is generally non-partisan. Each military force operates independently, guided by the government and tasked with defending its constitution.

Putin aligns with many of Sun Tzu's principles, but unlike modern democratic systems, his military is directly under his control.<sup>24</sup> His expectation of a swift victory was unrealistic. He anticipated that the special operation would conclude in weeks, yet three years later, the war continues.

### *How Effective and Coherent is this Strategy under Military?*

Having acquired only 20% of its objectives in three years highlights the Russian military's performance. While Ukrainian forces have struggled to push back in some areas, they have also managed to bring the war to Russian soil. This situation does not reflect well on Putin, despite Russia being a superpower on paper. The Russian strategy has failed in some respects but has succeeded in others. However, the time taken to acquire land underscores another failure on Russia's part. Several factors have contributed to this setback. According to Sun Tzu, addressing these breakdowns is crucial for a successful strategy.

The military serves as both the defensive and offensive arm of the state. It is highly organized and disciplined, symbolizing the strength of a nation. This strength is reflected in military personnel, their equipment, and the

---

24 Paul Grenier, "Konstantin Krylov's Ethical Theory and What It Reveals about the Propensity for Conflict between Russia and the West," *Telos* 201, (Winter 2022): 109–25, <https://doi.org/10.3817/1222201109>.

technologies they employ. Beyond warfare, the military also acts as an agent of change, influencing the nation in times of need. They are the primary actors in war, but when the military weakens, the civilian population may step in to support or replace them in defending or conquering territory. A leader's values shape the military, synchronizing its intent, mindset, and movements toward its perceived enemies. This unity between leadership and the military is the foundation of effective warfare.

### 3. Russian Strategy under Planning

A leader's values play a crucial role in waging war, planning, assessing troops, and preparing for the next steps. Leaders must organize for war when faced with a threat or when seeking to acquire territory. This is where planning plays an important role in strategy guided by the leader's goals. Putin's primary objective is to reunite the former Soviet Union while strengthening his grip on Russia as a strongman.<sup>25</sup> He relies on propaganda,<sup>26</sup> oligarchic ties, and authoritarian rule.<sup>27</sup> He prepares his generals by providing direction on how operations should be carried out at the right time.<sup>28</sup>

#### *How Effective and Coherent is this Strategy under Planning?*

There was a failure in Russian planning. Initially, the buildup of Russian forces at the Ukrainian border was a sign of strong preparation. However, the implementation was a major letdown, as the army failed to capture key cities, turning the plan into a disaster. The leadership overestimated its capabilities and underestimated the Ukrainian army. Ineffective planning negatively impacted soldier morale and the availability of supplies.

As a central value of leadership, planning provides crucial context from both internal and external perspectives. Evidence gathered during the planning phase informs the overall strategy and ensures rational decision-making.

---

25 Robert Horvath, "The Putin Regime and the Heritage of Dissidence," *Telos* 145 (Summer 2008): 7–30.

26 David Ionatamishvili, Daniel Lange, and Sanda Elina Svetoka, "Strategic Communications and Social Media in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict," in *Critical Infrastructure Protection Against Hybrid Warfare: Security-Related Challenges*, 86–99, January 2016, <https://doi.org/10.3233/978-1-61499-699-6-86>.

27 Andrej Poleev, *Putinism: A Phenomenological and Prototypical Investigation* (Enzymes, 2021).

28 Scott Shapiro, interviewed by Eli Kramer, "The War in Ukraine and the Threat of the Return of the Old-World Order," *Eidos: A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 7, no. 2 (September 2023): 103–10, <https://doi.org/10.14394/eidos.jpc.2023.0018>.

Effective planning mitigates challenges within and beyond the organization. Ultimately, a leader's values serve as the foundation for deep thinking and informed decision-making.

#### 4. Russian Strategy under Ability to Conquer

Putin's power relies heavily on the army. He provides direction and dictates the army's actions. However, the army has several flaws. Its effectiveness depends on both internal and external factors. Internally, morale, beliefs, and capabilities all contribute to its overall strength. Externally, factors such as discipline, equipment, training, and leadership support play a crucial role. If one or more of these elements fail, the entire operation is compromised. This is evident in the army's struggle to secure conquered territory. In the past three years, only 20% of the intended land has been acquired, a clear indicator of its overall effectiveness.

##### *How Effective and Coherent is this Strategy under Ability to Conquer?*

From the discussion above, it is evident that there is a failure in strategy. The Russian army's ability to conquer has diminished, with several factors contributing to its failure. Overconfidence, underestimating the opponent, poor planning, untrained personnel, corrupt leadership values, and a lack of popular support have all played a role in this strategic disaster. The ability to conquer works both ways. A leader's intent, combined with their values, fuels this ability. It is the willpower to overcome an opponent that drives success in war. However, behind this willpower lies something deeper—the leader's values, which are imposed on the military and the people. Values shape and direct willpower, influencing others to follow. Conquering is not merely an act of aggression but a skill, an outcome of imposing one's will upon another. However, this is no simple feat, as the opposing side is also driven by its own will, rooted in its values. Understanding oneself is key to gaining the ability to conquer an adversary.

#### Summation of Findings under Leader Values

Sun-Tzu's writings are primarily directed at rulers and generals. From his teachings, we can analyze how leaders behave based on the first four chapters. The Sage emphasizes what is expected of a leader to win battles. Any leader engaging in war must be well-prepared, as stated in Chapter One, where the importance of a state's stability and strategic planning is highlighted. This makes the state of affairs a crucial element of strategy.

A leader must possess confidence, self-belief, and a set of guiding values, as emphasized by the Sage. These factors determine the outcome of conflicts between leaders. The stronger a leader's resolve, the greater their ability to overcome perceived enemies. However, an opposing leader may have equal or even greater resolve, ultimately leading to the downfall of the weaker one.

## b. Environment

### 1. Russian Strategy under Configuration of Terrain

The Russian-Ukrainian border region has been a focal point of conflict. Crimea, previously part of Ukraine, was annexed by Russia in 2017 with minimal resistance, as Ukraine was unprepared for an immediate response.<sup>29</sup> The UN and NATO had limited options for intervention, given Russia's status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and its possession of nuclear weapons. Russian military planners expected a swift invasion, relying on their familiarity with the region from the Soviet era. However, they underestimated both the resilience of the Ukrainian people and the logistical challenges posed by the harsh winter conditions. The use of heavy tanks proved ineffective, as the transition from winter to spring turned much of the terrain to mud, which left Russian forces vulnerable.

#### *How Effective and Coherent is this Strategy under Configuration of Terrain?*

According to Sun-Tzu, military strategy is shaped by configurations and the Nine Terrains. The Russian-Ukrainian war illustrates the importance of understanding the landscape, as the Russian Army has struggled to navigate the countryside effectively. Relying solely on maps has proven insufficient; true mastery of the terrain requires knowledge of not just the physical environment but also the weather and the local population. This became evident in the strong resistance from Ukrainian civilians, who have actively opposed Russian forces.

The war has drawn significant international attention, with many nations becoming involved in various capacities. Ukraine has received extensive support from Western allies, including financial aid, military supplies, and strategic intelligence. Conversely, Russia has faced widespread sanctions and political isolation from much of the global community. Despite this, Moscow has

---

29 Aleksandar Pavković, "Sacralisation of Contested Territory in Nationalist Discourse: A Study of Milošević's and Putin's Public Speeches," *Critical Discourse Studies* 14, no. 5 (2017): 497–513, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2017.1360191>. Bebler, "Crimea and the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict."

continued seeking support from Iran, North Korea, and China, primarily through oil sales. North Korea has also contributed troops and supplies to bolster Russia's war efforts.

## 2. Russian Strategy under Nine Terrains

In Sun-Tzu's experience, war revealed nine distinct types of terrain, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. His key recommendation is to understand how to leverage each type of terrain effectively. The battlefield is not just a physical space—it is an environment that must be studied, adapted to, and strategically navigated. However, this knowledge has its limitations.

### *How Effective and Coherent is this Strategy under Nine Terrains?*

The Nine Terrains described by Sun-Tzu are based on his experiences in warfare, each representing different battlefield conditions that require unique strategic approaches. When analyzing the actions of the Russian Army, a key question arises: Did they fully understand the terrain they were entering? A prime example is the type of terrain where ambushes are most effective. In Ukraine, the defending forces have leveraged modern tools such as drones, Javelin missiles, and other light yet highly effective weaponry. These tools not only serve as deterrents but also allow Ukrainian forces to push back against Russian advances. The Russian Army's lack of intelligence on Ukraine's military capabilities has led to repeated strategic failures. However, it would be inaccurate to attribute all setbacks solely to Russian leadership.

### Summation of Findings under Environment

The sage, Sun-Tzu, emphasized minimizing losses in combat, particularly by leveraging advantageous terrain. A prime example is high ground, which provides a strategic edge by forcing enemies into an uphill battle. Holding elevated positions allows for easier defense and symbolizes superiority in warfare. Understanding one's place in the environment can determine victory or defeat, as each battlefield configuration requires a specific approach to attack or defend. By studying Sun-Tzu's teachings, we can learn how to capitalize on these advantages.

Additionally, grasping the significance of the Nine Terrains is crucial. These terrains represent different battlefield conditions, each with unique challenges and opportunities. Sun-Tzu prescribes the best course of action based on the advantages and threats present in each situation. Terrain is not just a physical space—it dictates how forces should engage and adapt. There are instances where protecting one's troops takes precedence, aligning with Sun-

Tzu's concept of vacuity, where actions complement the environment and favor the first occupiers. The interaction between opposing forces within a given terrain creates a dynamic balance, ultimately determining the victor based on their ability to understand and navigate the battlefield.

### c. People's Belief and Alignment / Maneuvering the Army

#### 1. Russian Strategy under Maneuvering

Russians have lived under authoritarian rule.<sup>30</sup> They are immersed in Putin's propaganda.<sup>31</sup> Many soldiers march with limited knowledge or without fully understanding why they are entering Ukraine. They only know the narrative presented by propaganda—that they are acting as saviors against a supposed Nazi regime. Putin has framed the invasion as a “special operation,” reinforcing this message as part of his propaganda.

Prior to the invasion, there was a significant military buildup along Ukraine's borders.<sup>32</sup> Putin then launched the unprovoked war, justifying it under false pretenses.<sup>33</sup> His ultimate goal is to annex Ukraine into Russia.<sup>34</sup> However, the army's values are not fully aligned with those of their leader.<sup>35</sup> Their motivation to march is largely driven by propaganda rather than genuine conviction.

#### *How Effective and Coherent is this Strategy under Maneuvering?*

The Russian army follows orders because it must, as a matter of command, but it does not necessarily believe in their leaders or the war itself.<sup>36</sup> This is

---

30 Wayne Cristaudo, “The Putin System: An Opposing View, by Grigory Yavlinsky, New York, Columbia University Press, 2019, 208 pp.,” *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 26, no. 6 (2021): 659–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2020.1837430>.

31 Lukyanov, “Putin's Russia,” 117–50.

32 Matthew Specter, “Realism after Ukraine: A Critique of Geopolitical Reason from Monroe to Mearsheimer,” *Analyse & Kritik* 44, no. 2 (2022): 243–67, <https://doi.org/10.1515/auk-2022-2033>

33 Kattago, “The Russia-Ukraine War.”

34 Harry van der Linden, “War Emissions, Russia's Invasion of Ukraine, and Just War Theory,” *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 37, no. 2 (2023): 97–113, <https://doi.org/10.5840/ijap202448200>.

35 Lavinia Stan, “Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia, by Timothy Frye,” *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 28, no. 5 (2023): 553–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2022.2143023>.

36 Francis D. Raška, “Civil Society in Putin's Russia,” *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 22, no. 1 (2017): 109–10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2016.1237429>.

evident in the forced drafts within Russia, the deployment of untrained soldiers, and instances of mutiny within their ranks. Many able-bodied individuals are fleeing the country by any means necessary. Most soldiers on the battlefield are poorly trained, yet they continue to obey orders. However, these orders come with consequences—Russian forces have suffered more casualties than Ukraine.

Mobilizing an army effectively is not just about issuing commands—it requires soldiers to move as one, driven by a shared sense of duty.<sup>37</sup> Putin, as an authoritarian leader, relies on command and control.<sup>38</sup> However, Sun-Tzu teaches that soldiers should act not just because they are ordered to, but because they genuinely believe in their leader and the cause they are fighting for. Sun-Tzu's guidance is directed toward generals, advising them on how to lead their subordinates with deeper strategic insight.

## 2. Russian Strategy under Nine Changes

In some ways, Sun-Tzu's teachings provide specific strategic guidance, though they were written in a different era. While the Russian army has attempted to apply these principles, its execution has been flawed. One key lesson from Sun-Tzu is the importance of identifying both strengths and weaknesses to develop a strategy suited to the situation. A successful strategy must also be adaptable, allowing for adjustments when necessary. However, this adaptability is largely absent in the Russian military, as they have struggled to make the necessary changes on the battlefield. Additionally, understanding priorities based on the evolving situation is crucial, yet this has not been consistently demonstrated. Some Russian troops fail to advance when necessary, disregarding the strategic principles that Sun-Tzu emphasized.

### *How Effective and Coherent is this Strategy under Nine Changes?*

Understanding the intent behind Sun-Tzu's "nine changes" is essential for adapting military action based on the situation. These changes provide specific strategic adjustments, allowing military personnel to leverage their strengths against their opponents. Sun-Tzu's recommendations aim to minimize losses for both attackers and defenders, emphasizing calculated decision-making. One such principle states, "There is terrain for which one does not contend," highlighting the importance of knowing when to engage and when to avoid

---

37 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan; or, The Matter, Forme and Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (London, 1651).

38 Meylahn, "Ukraine War."

confrontation.<sup>39</sup> This concept underscores the role of strengths and weaknesses in military strategy. However, this principle has not always been observed in Russian offensives, as their forces have engaged in battles where they were at a disadvantage. Avoiding unnecessary confrontations is a form of wisdom gained through experience, and it is a core part of Sun-Tzu's strategic philosophy.

### 3. Russian Strategy under Vacuity and Substance

Chapter six discusses how the Russian army should advance and secure territory. The key to success is seizing the battlefield and holding it while forcing the enemy to react and catch up. This aligns with Sun-Tzu's teachings. One advantage of being on the defensive is not only having familiarity with the terrain but also knowing the most strategic locations for launching counterattacks. Ukraine has leveraged this advantage effectively. Its army understands how to adapt to the landscape, while the Russian forces often struggle to keep up.

#### *How Effective and Coherent is this Strategy under Vacuity and Substance?*

Sun-Tzu teaches us how to conduct ourselves when facing an enemy. Arriving at the battlefield before an attack and maintaining control over positioning—without being influenced by the opponent—can make a significant difference during engagement. The side that secures the field first gains not only a tactical advantage but also better preparation, greater composure, and deeper familiarity with the terrain.

This knowledge, gained through strategic occupation, strengthens military forces by allowing them to anticipate and counter enemy movements effectively. It is shaped by the leadership's vision and the alignment of values between the military and the people. Those who arrive first can take decisive action with a more structured and informed approach.

### Summation of Findings under Maneuvering

People will not act unless they have a reason to do so. The loss of their homes, land, and livelihoods serves as a powerful motivator for defenders, aligning them with their leaders. This alignment is rooted in their faith in leadership, creating a unified force where the leader acts as the head and the people as the body. They move and act as one.

---

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Cleary, trans. and ed. *The Art of War: Complete Texts and Commentaries* (Boston and London: Shambhala Publications, 2003).

In addition to unity, adaptability is crucial. Armies must be nimble, flexible, and capable of adjusting to changing circumstances. This ability to maneuver effectively plays a key role in minimizing losses, preserving lives, and securing victories in both offensive and defensive operations.

#### d. Mitigation of internal and external forces

##### 1. Russian Strategy under Military Combat

The ability to engage in combat is determined by the capabilities of Russian military personnel. Assessing their strengths and weaknesses is crucial, as it directly influences battlefield outcomes. Combat effectiveness plays a key role in shaping military power, as victories and defeats impact overall strategy. The application of force aligns with the values set by the leadership, as seen in the ongoing Ukraine-Russia war.

The balance of power shifts depending on the circumstances of engagement. At times, Russia's superior military strength has allowed it to overpower Ukrainian forces. However, Ukraine has been able to push back by exploiting Russian weaknesses. One significant advantage for Ukraine has been its use of technology, particularly drones, to counteract Russia's military power.<sup>40</sup>

##### *How Effective and Coherent is this Strategy under Military Combat?*

Mitigation plays a key role in addressing both strengths and weaknesses while identifying opportunities and threats posed by perceived enemies. It is also influenced by the values and strategic objectives set by the Russian leadership. These objectives serve as a guiding framework for military mitigation efforts and the combat effectiveness of the Russian army. However, significant shortcomings in Russia's military strategy have become apparent, particularly in their ability to capture and hold territory in Ukraine.

##### 2. Russian Strategy under Strategic Military Power

Russian leaders and their army have fundamental flaws in their strategy, relying heavily on propaganda.<sup>41</sup> While the army has captured several cities,

---

40 Burgess, John P. "A Nation's Right to Exist: Insights from Christian Ethics for the War in Ukraine." *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 44, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2024): 321–39. <https://doi.org/10.5840/jsce2024822116>.

41 Betul Eksi and Elizabeth A. Wood, "Right-Wing Populism as Gendered Performance: Janus-Faced Masculinity in the Leadership of Vladimir Putin and Recep T. Erdogan," *Theory and Society* 48, no. 5 (2019): 733–51, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45219741>.

these gains have had little impact on the overall war. On paper, the Russian military is ranked among the world's top fighting forces, but the reality tells a different story. Rather than achieving strategic victories, they have focused on targeting cities to instill fear and terrorize the population. Despite losing ground, Russian forces continue to hold and occupy border cities. However, they are struggling with outdated supplies and an inability to replenish resources during the war. This shortage is largely due to the economic sanctions imposed on Russia by Ukraine's allies, further weakening the country's war efforts.

### *How Effective and Coherent is this Strategy under Strategic Military Power?*

Mitigation, as taught by Sun-Tzu, involves addressing both internal and external factors that affect an organization. It is the ability of armies to adapt to their circumstances. While Russia appeared to have the advantage and seemed more prepared on paper, the reality on the battlefield tells a different story. The Russian army possesses both old and new military supplies, but replacing hardware has become increasingly difficult due to embargoes and various sanctions. Another critical issue is the shortage of qualified military personnel, making recruitment a significant challenge. This weakness aligns with Sun-Tzu's teachings, highlighting Russia's failure to properly mitigate its strategic shortcomings.

The concept of the "economy of forces" emphasizes the efficient use of hardware, troops, and other military resources. Russia must ensure the optimal utilization of its forces to avoid prolonging the war, as extended conflicts lead to low morale and high attrition among troops. This challenge is not unique to attackers; prolonged warfare is also detrimental to defenders. In the end, a drawn-out war benefits no one.

### 3. Russian Strategy under Incendiary Attacks

Mitigation based on the situation is key to determining the type of attack to be executed. Sun-Tzu outlines five types of attacks, each with its own strategic significance. His highest priority is winning without fighting, as this minimizes casualties on both sides. However, achieving this requires meticulous planning and precise execution to neutralize an enemy before they can strike. In contrast, the Russian Army has largely relied on prolonged combat, with some offensives lacking a coherent strategy. Mitigation, according to Sun-Tzu, involves not just limiting conflict but also ensuring flexibility and adaptability in military operations. Incendiary attacks, for instance, follow a specific order—beginning with targeting the people and progressing in sequence to maximize the impact

on the enemy. However, the Russian Army has shown limited flexibility in its offensives, failing to effectively capture several key cities.

### *How Effective and Coherent is this Strategy under Incendiary Attacks?*

The Russian Army faces numerous challenges, yet it continues to launch offensive attacks—many of which fail to achieve their objectives. Some attacks are effectively thwarted by Ukrainian forces, highlighting the inefficiency of their strategy. In certain instances, the Russian Army relies on brute force, deploying large numbers of personnel and equipment to seize territory. This approach can be effective when Ukrainian defenders are outnumbered, but it does not always guarantee success.

### Summation of Findings under Mitigation of Internal and External Forces

Power symbolizes the ability to exert influence, whether through movement, force, or authority. This is evident in military engagements, where one side attempts to assert dominance over the other on the battlefield. Mitigation plays a crucial role in shifting power to one's advantage, allowing a force to exploit its strengths while testing the weaknesses of its opponent. Sun-Tzu emphasizes how the military should strategically apply power to gain the upper hand.

Without an aggressor, there is no need for defense. People are always the primary targets in warfare, as attacks are ultimately driven by the will, values, and intent of a leader. Mitigation in battle forces one side's strengths against the vulnerabilities of the other. Sun-Tzu's teachings prioritize preserving people—whether they are defenders or attackers.<sup>42</sup> Warfare objectifies the enemy, reducing them to a target of violence. This psychological toll is evident in soldiers on the battlefield, as taking another life strips away aspects of their own humanity.

#### e. Information / Employing Spies

##### 1. Russian Strategy under Spies and information.

Russian intelligence is one of the most experienced and well-established organizations in the world, employing various methods to gather critical

---

42 Douglas Kellner, "Baudrillard, Globalization and Terrorism: Some Comments on Recent Adventures of the Image and Spectacle on the Occasion of Baudrillard's 75th Birthday," *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 2, no. 1 (2005).

information on the battlefield.<sup>43</sup> In theory, this intelligence should provide strategic advantages that could shift the course of the war. However, in practice, this has not been the case. The war is being driven by leadership that prioritizes loyalty over truth, with Putin surrounding himself with advisers who reinforce his narrative rather than presenting objective intelligence. This neglect of data-driven information is part of the failure in strategy prolonging the war.

Putin has justified the invasion of Ukraine by framing it as an effort to reclaim historical Russian territory.<sup>44</sup> Modern intelligence operations have played a role in shaping propaganda that portrays Ukraine as a target for extermination,<sup>45</sup> reinforcing the idea of a “just war” under Putin’s leadership.<sup>46</sup> Historically, espionage has been a crucial tool in warfare. During Sun-Tzu’s time, spies infiltrated enemy states to gather intelligence on military size, technology, and strategic movements. The effectiveness of such intelligence often depended on the motivations of the spies—whether they were driven by patriotism, ideology, or financial gain.<sup>47</sup> In modern times, while intelligence agencies continue to play a vital role, the failure to act on accurate information can lead to strategic miscalculations, as seen in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

### *How Effective and Coherent is this Strategy under Spies and information?*

Russia possesses one of the most sophisticated spy networks in the world, rivaling the CIA of the United States and Mossad of Israel. However, intelligence is only as effective as its utilization by leadership. In Putin’s case, despite receiving vital reports from spies and military advisors, he appears to disregard critical intelligence, particularly regarding Ukraine’s defense capabilities. His initial objective of capturing Kyiv failed, not due to a lack of information but because of strategic miscalculations and an unwillingness to adapt. Instead of recalibrating his approach based on intelligence, he resorted to terrorizing the

---

43 K.M. Sweet, “Russian Law Enforcement under President Putin,” *Human Rights Review* 3, no. 1 (2002): 20–33, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12142-002-1001-6>.

44 Gábor Dániel Nagy, “Can War Be Just? A Case Analysis Attempt on the Russia–Ukraine War *Sine Ira Et Studio*,” *Open Journal of Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (2023): 407–17, <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2023.132027>.

45 Elena Musi, “Framing to Make an Argument: The Case of the Genocide Hashtag in the Russia-Ukraine War,” *Argumentation* 38 (2024): 269–88, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10503-024-09632-1>.

46 McMahan, “Just War Theory and the Russia-Ukraine War.”

47 Neilson, *Sun Tzu and Information Warfare*.

capital and issuing nuclear threats.<sup>48</sup> Sun-Tzu emphasized that spies are at the heart of warfare, as their intelligence shapes the outcome of battles. Information can be gathered by anyone, but it is only valuable if analyzed and acted upon effectively. The absence or disregard of solid intelligence data has had a significant impact on the progression of the war. It has led to confusion among troops on the ground, raised concerns among military leaders, and weakened public support. Ukraine has been able to capitalize on this vulnerability, enabling its forces to push back and resist the aggressors more effectively.

Understanding the scope of information acquired by spies is essential to grasping their role in warfare. Spies collect intelligence on various aspects, including enemy military positions, capabilities, and strategies. This information is then used to inform leaders, allowing them to make calculated decisions. Additionally, spies contribute to psychological warfare by influencing morale—both among troops and civilians—by disseminating positive reports that bolster confidence. Conversely, intelligence can also be leveraged for deception, serving either the attacker or the defender. In warfare, deception is not inherently unethical; rather, it is a strategic tool used to exploit enemy weaknesses and secure victories. For instance, misleading an adversary into believing that a military force is stronger or weaker than it truly is can create confusion and force the opponent into disadvantageous positions, ultimately leading to their defeat.

## Overall Summation of Findings under the Five Clusters

Engaging with Sun-Tzu's philosophy requires not just translation but also interpretation within its historical and contemporary contexts.<sup>49</sup> Scholars have long adapted his writings to modern strategic thinking,<sup>50</sup> making his teachings relevant beyond ancient warfare. By analyzing Sun-Tzu's work through five key elements—Leader Values, People's Beliefs, Mitigation, Environment, and Information—we gain a clearer understanding of how his philosophy applies to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Putin embodies some aspects of leadership but falls short in critical areas, leading to strategic miscalculations. The Russian people's wavering belief in the war has further undermined its effectiveness. The Russian military's inability

---

48 Smith and Dawson, "Mearsheimer, Realism, and the Ukraine War."

49 Paul van Els, review of *Sun Tzu: The Art of War. A New Translation*, trans. Michael Nylan, *Journal of Chinese Studies* 74 (2022): 286–92, <https://www.cuhk.edu.hk/ics/journal/articles/v74p286.pdf>.

50 Samuel Griffith, *The Art of War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

to mitigate weaknesses has resulted in inflexibility, slowing their progress. Meanwhile, Ukraine holds the environmental advantage, using its terrain and population resistance effectively. Lastly, information—essential in warfare—is mishandled by the Kremlin, creating a disconnect between Putin and his forces on the ground.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study shows that Russia's military strategy in Ukraine reveals critical misalignments that explain its setbacks, when examined through Sun-Tzu's five dimensions: Leader Values, Environment, People's Belief, Mitigation, and Information. Putin's authoritarian leadership emphasized planning and control but failed to inspire genuine conviction among troops and citizens. Russia underestimated Ukraine's terrain and resilience, while its reliance on propaganda and coercion eroded morale. Sanctions, logistical problems, and rigid tactics further weakened its position, and intelligence, though available, was disregarded or distorted, leading to flawed decisions.

These findings directly answer the study's research questions: leadership diverged from Sun-Tzu's call for adaptable values; people's belief was fractured compared to Ukraine's unity; mitigation strategies were inflexible under sanctions and shortages; environmental mastery was neglected; and intelligence, though central to Sun-Tzu, was misused. Together, these reveal how Russia's deviation from classical principles contributed to its operational failures.

For military planners and scholars, three insights emerge. First, leadership must pair authority with adaptability. Second, national morale and unity remain decisive in sustaining campaigns. Third, intelligence is only effective if acted upon; ignoring it leads to strategic blindness. These lessons reaffirm the enduring relevance of Sun-Tzu's philosophy in contemporary conflict.

Future research should expand this framework by comparing U.S. and NATO strategies under the same Sun-Tzu lens. Such comparisons would clarify how different doctrines address adaptability, morale, intelligence, and environmental awareness, and help assess the universality and limits of classical strategy in modern warfare.

## CONCLUSION

To fully grasp Sun-Tzu's philosophy, we must consider both the context behind his recommendations and the perspectives that shaped his teachings.

His deep understanding of the environment extends beyond physical terrain to include the role of people within an ecosystem. Sun-Tzu had the rare ability to anticipate long-term consequences, emphasizing strategy over brute force. His ethical stance is also clear—his ideal outcome is to achieve victory without conflict. Even when war is unavoidable, his second-best approach is not destruction but preservation.

Sun-Tzu wrote primarily for kings and generals, providing guidance tailored to ruling elites and military leaders. Many modern interpretations attempt to broaden his teachings for contemporary audiences. However, this approach can create a disconnect, as direct applications of ancient wisdom may not fully align with today's complexities. Instead of rigidly applying his words, a more effective method is adaptation—translating his ideas into modern contexts using relevant terminology and contemporary scenarios. By reframing ancient principles in a way that resonates today, we can preserve their strategic value while making them more actionable in today's world.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Building upon Sun-Tzu's insights, it is essential to examine deeper themes such as human nature, deception, the power of information, core values, strategic mitigation, and environmental awareness. Among these, values play a critical role—they serve as the glue that binds leaders and their people, ensuring the effective implementation of strategy. A leader's ability to master themselves and navigate conflicts is crucial, as it determines their capacity to inspire and unite. This dilemma is evident in Ukraine's current crossroads: should they continue defending at all costs, or should they consider a ceasefire? Such a decision would not only shape NATO's future but also impact the stability of Europe as a whole.<sup>51</sup> This would be another reason to study Ukraine, the USA, and NATO through the same lens as Sun-Tzu.

While Sun-Tzu originally addressed kings and generals, his strategic wisdom is not limited to military elites. When adapted to modern contexts, his principles can be applied by individuals and teams in various fields. The philosophical foundations—ethics, epistemology, and strategy—remain intact, even as the applications evolve. Engaging in a “conversation” with Sun-Tzu through interpretation allows for a contemporary understanding of his teachings. Though he lived in a vastly different era, his ideas remain relevant.

---

51 Jonathan Masters, “Ukraine: Conflict at the Crossroads of Europe and Russia,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, updated February 14, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/background/ukraine-conflict-crossroads-europe-and-russia>.

By using hermeneutics to bridge the past and present, we can extract practical lessons that resonate with today's challenges.

## STATEMENTS AND DECLARATIONS

### 1. Funding Details

The authors did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work.

### 2. Disclosure Statement

- a. The author declares no financial interests.
- b. The author affirms that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this research. Additionally, the author certifies that this manuscript is an original work and has not been previously published nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bailey, Jennifer Leigh. "Constructing a Crisis: Putin, the West and War in Ukraine." *Etikk i praksis – Nordic Journal of Applied Ethics* 17, no. 1 (June 30, 2023): 99–101. <https://doi.org/10.5324/eip.v17i1.5032>.
- Bebler, Anton. "Crimea and the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict." *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 15, no. 1 (March 2015): 35–54. [http://researchgate.net/publication/297774543\\_Crimea\\_and\\_the\\_Russian-Ukrainian\\_Conflict](http://researchgate.net/publication/297774543_Crimea_and_the_Russian-Ukrainian_Conflict).
- Bufacchi, Vittorio. "War Crimes in Ukraine: Is Putin Responsible?" *Journal of Political Power* 16, no. 1 (2023): 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2022.2105495>.
- Burgess, John P. "A Nation's Right to Exist: Insights from Christian Ethics for the War in Ukraine." *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 44, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2024): 321–39. <https://doi.org/10.5840/jsce2024822116>.
- Carpenter, Charli. "The Ethics of Human Rights Advocacy in the Ukraine War." *Ethics & International Affairs* 38, no. 3 (January 2025): 354–68. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679424000315>.
- Cimbala, Stephen J. "Sun Tzu and Salami Tactics? Vladimir Putin and Military Persuasion in Ukraine, 21 February–18 March 2014." *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 27, no. 3 (2014): 441–63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2014.932623>

Cleary, Thomas, trans. and ed. *The Art of War: Complete Texts and Commentaries*. Boston and London: Shambhala Publications, 2003.

Cristaudo, Wayne. "The Putin System: An Opposing View, by Grigory Yavlinsky." *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 26, no. 6 (2021): 659–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2020.1837430>.

Dorosh, Lesia, Jarosław Nocoń, and Yuliya Zakaulova. "Social Networks in Electoral Campaigns: A Comparative Analysis of the Cases of Donald Trump (USA) and Volodymyr Zelensky (Ukraine)." *European Journal of Transformation Studies* 9, no. 2 (June 16, 2021): 52–71. <https://czasopisma.bg.ug.edu.pl/index.php/journal-transformation/article/view/7088>.

Eksi, Betül, and Elizabeth A. Wood. "Right-Wing Populism as Gendered Performance: Janus-Faced Masculinity in the Leadership of Vladimir Putin and Recep T. Erdogan." *Theory and Society* 48, no. 5 (2019): 733–51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45219741>.

Espindola, Juan. "Facial Recognition in War Contexts: Mass Surveillance and Mass Atrocity." *Ethics & International Affairs* 37, no. 2 (2023): 177–92. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679423000151>.

Fang, Yi, and Zhiquan Shao. "The Russia-Ukraine Conflict and Volatility Risk of Commodity Markets." *Finance Research Letters* 50 (December 2022): 103264. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.frl.2022.103264>.

Feng, Kuan. "A Study of Sun Tzu's Philosophical Thought on the Military." *Chinese Studies in Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (1971): 116–57. <https://doi:10.2753/CSP1097-14670203116>.

Floudas, Demetrius A. "'Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Atomic Warfare but Were Afraid to Ask': Nuclear Strategy in the Ukraine War Era." Lecture presented at Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge, February 29, 2024. <https://talks.cam.ac.uk/talk/index/212134>.

Frey, Bruno S., and Marcel Kucher. "World War II as Reflected on Capital Markets." *Economics Letters* 69, no. 2 (November 2000): 187–91. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0165-1765\(00\)00269-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0165-1765(00)00269-X).

Gaur, Ajai, Alexander Settles, and Juha Väättänen. "Do Economic Sanctions Work? Evidence from the Russia–Ukraine Conflict." *Journal of Management Studies* 60, no. 6 (September 2023): 1391–1414. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12933>.

- Greene, Samuel A., and Graeme B. Robertson. *Putin v. the People: The Perilous Politics of a Divided Russia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019.
- Grenier, Paul. "Konstantin Krylov's Ethical Theory and What It Reveals about the Propensity for Conflict between Russia and the West." *Telos* 201 (Winter 2022): 109–25. <https://doi.org/10.3817/1222201109>.
- Griffith, Samuel. *The Art of War*. London: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Gruber, Helmut. "Snyder and Habermas on the War in Ukraine: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Elite Media Discourse in Germany." *Critical Discourse Studies* 22, no. 5 (2025): 494–510. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2024.2331164>.
- Havlik, Peter. "Economic Consequences of the Ukraine Conflict." *wiiw Policy Notes* 14 (November 2014). The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw). <https://wiiw.ac.at/economic-consequences-of-the-ukraine-conflict-dlp-3427.pdf>.
- Hlosek, Alexander George. *RussoUkrainian War through the Lens of Sun Tzu*. Master's thesis, Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences, 2024. <https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/191347>.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan; or, The Matter, Forme and Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil*. London, 1651.
- Horvath, Robert. "The Putin Regime and the Heritage of Dissidence." *Telos* 145 (Summer 2008): 7–30.
- Hovorun, Cyril. "War and Autocephaly in Ukraine." *Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal* 7 (2020): 1–25. [https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo\\_fac/371](https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac/371).
- Ionatamishvili, Lange, and Sanda Elina Svetoka. "Strategic Communications and Social Media in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict." In *Critical Infrastructure Protection Against Hybrid Warfare: Security-Related Challenges*, 86–99. January 2016. <https://doi.org/10.3233/978-1-61499-699-6-86>.
- Kattago, Siobhan. "The RussiaUkraine War and the Sediments of Time." *Studia Philosophica Estonica* 17 (2024): 120–33. <https://doi.org/10.12697/spe.2024.17.11>.
- Kellner, Douglas. "Baudrillard, Globalization and Terrorism: Some Comments on Recent Adventures of the Image and Spectacle on the Occasion of Baudrillard's 75th Birthday." *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 2, no. 1 (2005).

- Lane, Jan-Erik. "Philosophy of War: The Ukraine." *Philosophy Study* 12, no. 5 (May 2022): 259–61. <https://doi.org/10.17265/2159-5313/2022.05.002>.
- Lin, Faqin, Xuecao Li, Ningyuan Jia, Fan Feng, Hai Huang, Jianxi Huang, Shenggen Fan, Philippe Ciaes, and Xiao-Peng Song. "The Impact of Russia-Ukraine Conflict on Global Food Security." *Global Food Security* 36 (March 2023): 100661. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2022.100661>.
- Lord, Carnes. "A Note on Sun Tzu." *Comparative Strategy* 19, no. 4 (2000): 301–07. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495930008403217>.
- Lukyanov, Fyodor. "Putin's Russia: The Quest for a New Place." *Social Research* 76, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 117–50. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40972141>.
- Masters, Jonathan. "Ukraine: Conflict at the Crossroads of Europe and Russia." *Council on Foreign Relations*, updated February 14, 2023. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/ukraine-conflict-crossroads-europe-and-russia>.
- McNeilly, Mark. *Sun Tzu and the Art of Business: Six Strategic Principles for Managers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- McMahan, Jeff. "Just War Theory and the Russia-Ukraine War." *Studia Philosophica Estonica* 17 (2024): 54–67. <https://doi.org/10.12697/spe.2024.17.06>.
- Meylahn, Johann-Albrecht. "Ukraine War: A War of Languages and Bodies." *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 78, no. 1 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.8005>.
- Musi, Elena. "Framing to Make an Argument: The Case of the Genocide Hashtag in the Russia-Ukraine War." *Argumentation* 38 (2024): 269–88. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10503-024-09632-1>.
- Nagy, Gábor Dániel. "Can War Be Just? A Case Analysis Attempt on the Russia-Ukraine War Sine Ira Et Studio." *Open Journal of Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (2023): 407–17. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2023.132027>.
- Neilson, Robert E. *Sun Tzu and Information Warfare*. Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1997.
- Nerlinger, Martin, and Sebastian Utz. "The Impact of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict on Energy Firms: A Capital Market Perspective." *Finance Research Letters* 50 (December 2022): 103243. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.frl.2022.103243>.
- Ota, Fumio. "Sun Tzu in Contemporary Chinese Strategy." *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 73 (2nd Quarter 2014): 76–80.

- Patalakh, Artem. "On the Possible Foreign Policy of the Post-Putin Russia: The Case of Alexei Navalny's Viewpoints on Foreign Affairs." *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 12, no. 4 (2018): 9–31.
- Petroniuk, Vadym Vadymovych. "Effectiveness of Using a Theoretical Communication Model to Overcome a Crisis in Comparison with the Practical Experience of Building a Communication Field During a Crisis: The Experience of Ukraine." *Epistemological Research in Philosophy, Social and Political Sciences* 7, no. 1 (2024): 172–79. <https://visnukpfs.dp.ua/index.php/PFS/article/view/1189>.
- Raška, Francis D. "Civil Society in Putin's Russia." *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 22, no. 1 (2017): 109–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2016.1237429>.
- Rowley, Alison. *Putin Kitsch in America*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019.
- Schwartz, Matthias. "In a Lad's World. A Popular TV Series and Social Media in the Shadow of the Russo-Ukrainian War." *Filosofiya – Philosophy* 33, no. 3S (2024). <https://doi.org/10.53656/phil2024-03S-10>.
- Shapiro, Scott. Interview by Eli Kramer. "The War in Ukraine and the Threat of the Return of the Old-World Order." *Eidos: A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 7, no. 2 (September 2023): 103–10. <https://doi.org/10.14394/eidos.jpc.2023.0018>.
- Sharma, Umas. *In Quest of Peace: Indian Culture Shows the Path – Sun Tzu Response to Terrorism*. New Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, 2006.
- Smith, Nicholas Ross, and Grant Dawson. "Mearsheimer, Realism, and the Ukraine War." *Analyse & Kritik* 44, no. 2 (2022): 315–28. <https://doi.org/10.1515/auk-2022-2023>.
- Specter, Matthew. "Realism after Ukraine: A Critique of Geopolitical Reason from Monroe to Mearsheimer." *Analyse & Kritik* 44, no. 2 (2022): 291–313. <https://doi.org/10.1515/auk-2022-2033>.
- Sonnenfeld, Jeffrey. "Almost 300 Companies Have Withdrawn from Russia— But Some Remain." *Yale School of Management*, 2022. <https://som.yale.edu/story/2022/almost-300-companies-have-withdrawn-russia-some-remain>.

- Stan, Lavinia. Review of *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia*, by Timothy Frye. *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 28, no. 5 (2023): 553–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2022.2143023>.
- Sweet, K. M. "Russian Law Enforcement under President Putin." *Human Rights Review* 3, no. 1 (2002): 20–33. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12142-002-1001-6>
- Sweitzer, Christopher. *The Russo-Ukrainian War Conflict through the Lens of Sun Tzu*. Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Combat Development Command, 2018.
- Tao, Hanzhang. *Sun Tzu's Art of War: The Modern Chinese Interpretation*. New York: Sterling Publishing, 2000.
- Tosun, Onur Kemal, and Arman Eshraghi. "Corporate Decisions in Times of War: Evidence from the Russia-Ukraine Conflict." *Finance Research Letters* 48 (2022): 102923. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.frl.2022.102920>.
- Ukeachusim, Chidinma P. "Russia–Ukraine War: Understanding and Responding to Wars and Rumours of Wars as ἀρχὴ ὁδίνων." *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 79, no. 4 (2023): a8717. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i4.8717>.
- Umar, Zaghum, Onur Polat, Sun-Yong Choi, and Tamara Teplova. "The Impact of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict on the Connectedness of Financial Markets." *Finance Research Letters* 48 (2022): 102976. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.frl.2022.102976>.
- van der Linden, Harry. "War Emissions, Russia's Invasion of Ukraine, and Just War Theory." *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 37, no. 2 (2023): 97–113. <https://doi.org/10.5840/ijap202448200>.
- van Els, Paul. Review of *Sun Tzu: The Art of War. A New Translation by Michael Nylan*, by Michael Nylan. *Journal of Chinese Studies* 74 (2022): 286–92. <https://www.cuhk.edu.hk/ics/journal/articles/v74p286.pdf>.
- Wei, Chunjuan Nancy. "'No Angel': Sun Tzu on the RussiaUkraine War and Zelensky's Quagmire." *International Journal for Peace and Public Leadership* 1 (2025): 45–61. <https://doi.org/10.63470/DETN8897>.
- Wendland, Aaron James. "Philosophy and Current Affairs: The Russia-Ukraine War." *Studia Philosophica Estonica* 17 (2024): 1–13. <https://ojs.utlib.ee/index.php/spe/article/view/24396>.
- Wilson, Kenneth. "Ruling Russia: Authoritarianism from the Revolution to Putin." *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 23, no. 6 (2018): 728–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2018.1449403>.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Eduard Vicuna is an IT executive, business consultant, and researcher specializing in strategy, IT infrastructure, cybersecurity, and strategic management. With over 28 years of industry experience, he has successfully led IT teams, spearheaded business transformation initiatives, and implemented corporate strategies. He holds a Doctorate in Business Administration from Colegio de San Juan de Letran and an MBA from the Ateneo Graduate School of Business. Currently, he is pursuing a PhD in Philosophy at De La Salle University, where his research focuses on strategy. Dr. Vicuna has held key leadership roles, including Senior Technical Account Manager at TaskUs, Technical Program Manager at Teleperformance, and Infrastructure Manager at Harbour IT Asia. As a freelance business consultant, he continues to provide expertise in enterprise IT solutions, cloud computing, and data security. He is the author of *No Non-Sense Strategy* (2019) and has published research on strategic management, including his doctoral dissertation on the Strategic Management Phases Model. His forthcoming work explores the philosophical dimensions of strategy.