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**GEARING FOR BATTLE:
ANCIENT WARRIOR WISDOM FOR NEGOTIATION**

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Gearing for Battle: Ancient Warrior Wisdom for Negotiation

by Andrea Kupfer Schneider, Vasudha Srinivasan & James Chiu*

Introduction

This article examines the art of negotiation through the lens of three ancient texts from diverse cultures: the *Bhagavad Gita* from Hinduism, *The Art of War* from the Chinese culture, and the *Torah* from Judaism. As these texts come from distinct traditions and from different parts of the world, it might be assumed there exists no common ground between them. Yet, each of these texts is designed to give leaders advice about conflict. In fact, there are allusions in all three texts to avoiding war, being just, and offering mercy. Sun Tzu has perhaps the most well-known aphorisms in Chapter 3 of *The Art of War* – “to subdue the enemy's army without a war indicates superlative wisdom” and “a good strategist should bring the enemy to his knees without staging a war.”

Of course the focus on war raises questions of applicability in peace-making and in negotiation. Ostensibly, these texts may seem more applicable to litigation or distributive negotiation. (And, in fact, both *The Art of War* and the *Torah* devote significant attention to deception of the enemy.) After delving deeper, however, it is readily apparent that the wisdom provided in each text provides advice that can be utilized in peace-making and in integrative (or problem-solving) negotiation. After providing a brief introduction to the texts, this article examines four lessons common to all.

History of the Texts

The Bhagavad Gita—The Hindu Tradition

The *Bhagavad Gita*, often referred to as the *Gita*, is part of the Hindu epic, *Mahabharata*. The story of *Mahabharata*¹ describes a dynastic struggle between the warring cousins, the Pandavas and the Kauravas of the Kuru clan, which culminates in the epic battle of Kurekshetra (“the Great War”). Ultimately, the Pandavas emerge victorious. In this epic, the Pandavas are generally seen as the heroes and the upholders of good (i.e., the Hindu concept of *Dharma*), while the Kauravas are seen to be the antitheses of *Dharma*.² Out of the *Mahabharata*'s hundred thousand-odd verses, the *Gita* spans about 700 verses and takes the form of a dialogue between Arjuna (the third of the Pandava brothers and generally recognized as the finest warrior in that time) and

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Krishna (a human manifestation of God, who is Arjuna's charioteer for the duration of the Great War). Right before the start of the Great War, Arjuna, as the commander-in-chief for the Pandavas, moves to the battle front and gazes upon his alleged enemies, many of whom are actually family, friends and revered teachers. As he absorbs this, he loses his nerve and tells Krishna that he wishes to lay his weapons down, abandon the war, and retire to a lifetime of solitude and contemplation. While that seems noble, Krishna explains how Arjuna's impulse is fallacious because it is not embarked upon with the right training and mindset; instead, it is, in fact, an impulse to shirk his duty. The *Gita* aims to provoke Arjuna (and ultimately the reader) to recognize that what we deem to be the "objective" world is an illusion, and that the world as we know it is always seen through the lens of an individual's perception. As such, taking action with a view to attaining the material and tangible is an exercise in futility as: what is "objective" is really a shifting goalpost that is determined by each individual's perception. (And this is already a lesson in negotiation of the importance of perception.) Rather, the *Gita* instructs³ that it is best that one takes action, viewing it as one's fundamental duty, without expectation of the fruits of the action. Needless to say, at the end of the *Gita*, Arjuna arises and fights, with the right attitude and clarity of thought.

The Art of War—The Chinese Culture

Although *The Art of War* is not a religious text, it is regarded as a "bible" by many strategists from ancient to modern time. The text is a treatise on the art of war, containing many gems of wisdom useful to warriors and negotiators alike. It was written by the Chinese strategist Sun Wu, addressed respectfully in China as Sun Tzu (Master Sun). He was born into a noble family with a military background over 2,500 years ago in the Spring and Autumn Period. Due to the internal unrest in his birth State of Qi, he fled to the State of Wu. There he presented his treatise on the art of war to He Lu, the King of Wu. The King was impressed and appointed Sun a general. Under his command, the State of Wu achieved hegemony over the other States, and Sun Tzu's treatise became a military classic in China; it is the oldest military treatise in the world.

The influence of this book of 13 chapters, with a little more than 5,000 Chinese characters (words) is not confined to China. The first English version of *The Art of War* was published in 1905.⁴ Since then, versions in many other languages have been published, including in Arabic, Burmese, Czech, Dutch, German, Hebrew, Italian, Korean, Malaysian, Romanian, Russian, Thai and Vietnamese. Moreover, many of Sun Tzu's strategies have been applied with success both in modern warfare and in business around the world. Trade press adaptations are common, with titles such as *Sun Tzu and the Art of Business* (McNeilly 2012) or *Sun Tzu Strategies for Selling* (Michaelson and Michaelson 2004) being quite typical.

The Torah—The Jewish Tradition

The *Torah* consists, in the narrowest sense of the term, of the five books of the Hebrew Bible. Many also use "Torah" to refer to all Jewish law but, for the purposes of this essay, we focus on the five books. These five books, also referred to as the Five Books of Moses, are known more commonly to non-Jews as the Old Testament. This consists of Genesis (the story of the creation of the world), Exodus (primarily focused on Moses), Leviticus (primarily focused on laws), Numbers (focused on the 40 years in the desert and conquering of the land of Israel) and Deuteronomy (the final address of Moses and commandments that discuss the interactions with other nations). The teachings of the *Torah* were said to be given to Moses by God at Mount Sinai.

Biblical warrior advice can be found in several different locations in the *Torah* as various battles are fought. A primary location is in Deuteronomy where the laws of justice as well as the laws of war are discussed. This part of the *Torah*, interestingly for lawyers, includes “Justice, justice shall thou pursue,” one of the most famous phrases in the Bible and seen as the underpinning of Jewish law. And examples of battles occur throughout the *Torah* and into the next part of the Bible (the books of the Prophets), as they tell the story of the conquest of Israel. The *Torah’s* laws on war, justice, and community are widely used as a model for legal systems throughout the Western world. In addition, the writings (Ketuvim) that supplement the Torah also provide interesting advice, particularly in Proverbs. These relevant sayings are also cited as examples of ancient wisdom.

Common Elements of Advice

Self-Awareness and Faith versus Power

Inner strength and virtue is emphasized in all three texts. In Chapter 1, Sun Tzu lists the five fundamental virtues of a general: wisdom, trustworthiness, benevolence, courage and strictness. This reflects the importance Sun Tzu attaches to the qualities of the leaders, with wisdom on top of the list. Both commander generals in battle and lead negotiators in business need wisdom to face the inevitable unexpected circumstances and surprises. Both the general and lead negotiator must be courageous to meet all the adversities, and be trustworthy to their own soldiers or team. They should also be strict to themselves as well as to their team members.

Later, in Chapter 4, Sun Tzu addresses the issue of power perceptions by stating that “a good strategist first makes himself invulnerable and watches for the chance that the enemy becomes vulnerable.” He also puts forth the inter-relationship of the five notions of the rules of war:

[D]isparity in the extent of land between the two sides will lead to different quantities of resources; this in turn leads to odds in the number of soldiers available; this again gives rise to the imbalance in the military strength of the two sides; which finally determines the chances of victory.

So too in negotiation, the relative strength and power of the two sides invariably affect the outcome.

Similarly, in the Bible, faith and courage are seen as part of the necessary belief system before going into battle. The *Torah’s* advice to the Israelites states, “When you take the field against your enemies and see...forces larger than yours—have no fear of them for the Lord...is with you.” The theme of not to freeze or panic in the face of more power is, in fact, told in story after story of the Israelite conquest of the land of Canaan. Furthermore, many stories, both famous and less well-known, tell how the less powerful are the heroes of the battle. (Herzog and Gichon 2002). David slaying Goliath is an iconic Western story (helped by Michaelangelo.) In Judges, Jael (a woman) slays the very strong general Sisera. Gideon, with only 300 soldiers, defeats the Canaanites. This ties in well with negotiation advice to have faith in yourself and not to let perceived power be the determining feature of the negotiation (see generally Fisher and Ury 1991; Adler and Silverstein 2000).

In the *Gita*, Krishna also takes pains to illustrate how one must, first, be self-aware and

assess one's own temperament. Krishna outlines the three broad temperaments (*gunas*) of mankind as follows: *Sattwa Guna* (Attachment to Happiness), *Rajo Guna* (Attachment to Action) and *Tamo Guna* (Attachment to Baser Natures). Krishna is careful to state that having any of these temperaments is neither good nor bad, and that it is the law of the Universe (see generally Chinmayananda 1996: 860-919). Ultimately, the aim is to condition oneself to become a *Stita Prajna*, a person established in wisdom (Chinmayananda 1996: 145-159). Such a person, also known as one with a steady understanding and who lives in equanimity; is unmoved by circumstances; and is of a mind "not shaken by adversity and who in prosperity does not hanker after pleasures, who is free from attachment, fear and anger."

Balance is likewise very important for a negotiator. A skilled negotiator is not thrown off by unexpected information, and retains perspective and a sense of purpose regarding negotiation objectives. A skilled negotiator is constantly self-aware and pays particular attention to emotions before choosing to react, and in so doing transforms reactive behavior into proactive behavior.

Understanding of the Context

Just as contemporary negotiation literature highlights the necessity of preparation and understanding of context, so too do our ancient texts. For Sun Tzu, understanding the conditions of weather and terrain were key. Similarly, a negotiator needs to make sure that the temperature, lighting and set up of the room are comfortable. And the negotiator needs to understand the parameters of the dispute and in which context it occurs. In the first chapter, Sun Tzu also stresses that "[h]e who makes full assessment of the situation at the pre-war council meetings in the temple is more likely to win. He who makes insufficient assessment of the situation at these meetings is less likely to win." In Chapter 2, Sun Tzu calls attention to the dependence of wars upon manpower, material and financial resources. Adequate preparations in these three areas must be made before embarking upon a war. In Chapter 3, Sun Tzu states that "you will win when you have good preparations and your enemy is unprepared."

This preparation and understanding of the situation also allows for flexibility. In Chapter 8, Sun Tzu says,

a general is proficient in the conduct of wars if he knows how to make changes flexibly as dictated by the specific conditions; even though he has the terrain at his fingertips, he cannot take advantage of it unless he knows how to make changes flexibly as dictated by the specific conditions. A wise general invariably weighs both the advantageous and disadvantageous factors. As he takes into account the advantageous factors, he can better achieve his aims; as he takes into account the disadvantageous factors, he can head off disasters.

For negotiation, this can translate into understanding the relative power of each side. One has to consider and calculate one's best alternative to a negotiated agreement (BATNA). The better one's BATNA, the greater will be one's power. By the same token, one also has to be aware of the other party's BATNA. If the BATNA of the other party appears to be better, try to improve one's own BATNA by applying knowledge, time, money, people, connections, and wits into devising the best solution for oneself (Fisher and Ury 1991).

In the *Gita*, preparation is set out as the next step after self-assessment. Once one has a grasp of one's own temperament, conditioning and preparing oneself in a manner that is appropriate for their relevant temperament is crucial before one can become a *Stita Prajna*. For

example, it is futile to expect a man of action such as Arjuna to even undertake inner contemplation, as he first needs to exhaust his restlessness (i.e., the inherent disposition) before he is in any frame of mind to progress. Similarly, negotiating would definitely require specific preparation tailored to the dispute and it is important to keep in mind that this includes preparation of oneself. Remembering your own temperament, identifying your offers and arguments, and arguably most important, identifying emotional reactions to certain issues and characters in the dispute are crucial to the success of a negotiation. This level of awareness enables skilled negotiators to calibrate their reaction to new information.

In the *Torah*, stories of battles often discuss the context and terrain in detail. Rather than given as a directive to warriors in general, lessons are outlined by example. Exodus tells the story of how Moses led the Israelites to the edge of the Red Sea in a circuitous manner so that the Egyptian army would have only a narrow pathway (over a likely sandbar) to chase the Israelites. The iconic scene in the Ten Commandments of the Red Sea swallowing the Egyptian Army follows this. Later, Moses sends twelve spies into the land of Israel to find out specific information about the people, their dwellings, the fruit, and even whether there is wood, in order to determine where and how to enter Israel. Many years later, Deborah, the Judge, and her general Barak, are able to defeat the Canaanites, who have superior weaponry, when Deborah's strategy draws them into a muddy swampland for the battle. (Scholars surmise that Deborah likely waited for rain in order to ensure victory.) The Canaanites fail to recognize that their chariots will be useless and, in fact, lead to their defeat. In negotiation, ignorance of the context will equally be devastating. Those negotiators that are wise, that can take advantage of the situation (or even wait for a better situation) will be more successful.

Leading a Team

Each text also discusses the importance of training, selecting, and motivating your team. Sun Tzu advises that a leader trains his team members, disciplines them, rewards or punishes them fairly and appropriately. The negotiation equivalent is to make sure that the negotiator's team is well-prepared and armed with evidence and arguments in their favor. Finally, in Chapter 9, Sun Tzu explains the importance of discipline in the army:

If you punish the troops before they are attached to you, they will bear you a grudge. As they bear you a grudge, you can hardly make them obey your orders. However, when they are already attached to you, if you do not punish them as they deserve, you can hardly make them obey your orders either. Cement them with kindness and unify them with discipline. Thus, they will be devoted to you. If commands are consistently carried out to discipline the troops, they will observe them as a matter of course; if not, they will not. That commands can be consistently carried out reflects that the army leadership is on very good terms with the rank and file.

In the *Torah*, there is also the concept of making sure you have the right troops -- both that they are ready for war and that they will be good. A story from Prophets -- Gideon -- describes how he meticulously chooses his team of only 300 warriors based on several different tests, including how they bend down to drink water from a stream. (Only those that keep on their weapons and bend fully down to the water are chosen rather than those who take the time to remove their

weapons and bend down from their knees.) Earlier commentary in the *Torah* notes that commanders are to ask if among the troops there is: “anyone who has built a new home but not dedicated it; anyone who has planted a vineyard but not harvested; anyone who has paid the bride-price (betrothed), but not yet married.” Any troops falling into these categories are to be excused from battle and sent home. All of these discuss the readiness and devotion of the troops—if they are not ready, if they might be focused on other things, if their loss would be too much of a loss, then do not force them into war.

This can be linked with negotiation advice to focus on the task at hand as well as preparation for the negotiation. The immediate question -- can you focus on the negotiation or will you be distracted -- ties into mindfulness as well as the skill of active listening (Riskin 2004). This advice also hints at the idea that you want everything ready before going into battle, that you do not want unfinished business.

In the same *Torah* passage as above, commanders are also to ask the troops: “Is there anyone afraid and disheartened? Let him go back to his home, lest the courage of his comrades flag like his.” The biblical commanders do not want the lack of courage to impact others. Rather than forcing their presence on the field, these soldiers are excused. This is interesting for thinking about negotiation in terms of making a team and making sure that all teammates on same page.

The *Gita's* perspective on leadership is framed differently than that offered in the *Torah* and *The Art of War* since it is a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna. Significantly, the dialogue is observed by two additional characters, Sanjaya, the minister for the *Kauravas*, and King Dhritarashtra, the father of Duryodhana, who is contesting the Pandava's right to the throne. While Krishna is dispensing advice to Arjuna, he is also doing so to his observers. The lesson from the *Gita* for negotiation is two-fold. First, as a leader, never assume that your actions remain unobserved -- it is always important to walk the talk and behave in line with the principles you demand of your team. Second, a team is only as strong as its leader, and a wise leader is one who heeds good counsel.

This leads to an additional point made in the *Gita* and in Proverbs. In the *Gita*, King Dhritarashtra, the only one who had any power to halt the Great War, chose not to exercise that right as he was blinded by his love for his son. He selectively chose which advice to follow even though it was clear what ethical action should have been taken. Yet Sanjaya's plea to halt the madness fell on deaf ears. Despite being a privileged first hand listener to *the Gita* (like Arjuna), the King was unable to take its message. Self-awareness and introspection are vital tools for a good negotiator, but they can be enhanced with good counsel by one's team. But one's team would be encouraged to provide good counsel if they know that it would be heeded, if reasonable. This may be fairly obvious but the importance of this for successful negotiations cannot be emphasised enough. When leading negotiations, trusting and applying good counsel is important as: it acts as a reliable sounding board, and provides alternative perspectives and insights that may have been otherwise missed due to the team members' differences in focus, as well as the lead negotiator's own unconscious biases or reactions.

Similarly, in Proverbs (arguably written by King Solomon, a very successful warrior and leader), the theme of listening to counsel is repeated four times: “For you shall wage war for yourself with strategies, and the victory results from the superiority of the counselor” (24.6); “Plans with counsel will be established, and with strategies wage war” (20.18); “Plans are foiled for lack of counsel, but they are established through many advisers” (15.22); and “Without strategy the people fall, but with many counselors there is victory” (11.14).

Persuading the Other Side

In Chapter 3, Sun Tzu puts forward the noted military aphorism “[i]f you know the other side and know yourself, you can fight one hundred battles without the danger of being defeated once.” He also says that “you will win if you know how to use an army in the light of its strength relative to that of the enemy.” In Chapter 10, Sun Tzu states that a general should make assessments of the enemy and the terrain. If you have an incomplete knowledge of the other side, of yourself and of the terrain, your victory is only half certain. “If you know the other party and know yourself, victory will not be at risk; if you know both the terrain and the weather conditions, victory will be complete.”

In Chapter 9, Sun Tzu lists thirty-two tell-tale signs which help to discern the actual conditions and intentions of the enemy. For example,

If the enemy envoy uses humble words and yet the enemy is found to be stepping up preparations, this shows he is going to advance; if the enemy envoy uses strong language and the enemy makes as if it would advance, this shows he is going to retreat; if the enemy has suffered no setbacks and yet sues for peace, this may be a plot; ...if the enemy seems to waver between advancing or retreating, he is trying to lure you.... If an envoy from the enemy offers talks in a pleasing and humble manner, the enemy is really in need of a truce. Be on your guard if the enemy confronts you with his angry troops and yet for a long time he neither engages you nor retreats.

Likewise, in negotiation, one has to carefully assess the verbal and written messages from the other side, as well as the subtle tell-tale signs of body language, to discern the other side’s hidden agenda and real strengths and weaknesses.

The story of one of Abraham’s first battles in the Torah gives an interesting lesson in persuasion. After Abraham wins a battle and rescues his nephew Lot, the other local kings (including the King of Sodom) offer him the spoils of war. Abraham refuses, “Lest thou shouldest say: I have made Abram rich.” In other words, Abraham’s reputation as a protector and ally (and fierce warrior) is more important in the ongoing relationship with the neighboring kingdoms. Proverbs (22.1) further supports this, stating, “A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches.”

Abraham also negotiates with God in the Bible to later spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, asking whether it is fair to destroy the righteous along with the evil. In classic haggling, Abraham starts his bargaining with 50 men and ends up persuading God to spare the cities if there are even ten righteous men. (Unfortunately for the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah, there are not even ten righteous men and the cities are destroyed.) This story, widely used as an example of God’s mercy, also teaches the importance of persuasion. Abraham uses a standard -- not harming the innocent even at the expense of allowing evil -- to persuade God to change his harsh decree. Proverbs also offers advice on the importance of listening. For example, Proverbs (18.13) states that “He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him” underscoring the need to understand the situation and the other side.

In the *Gita*, aside from what is exchanged between Krishna and Arjuna, much can also be observed from the interaction between Krishna and Arjuna and the pattern of their dialogue. The opening scene of the *Gita* features Arjuna standing in his chariot, broken from grief. He attempts

to rationalize abandoning the war as he cannot bear to slay his kith and kin who have formed the opposing army (Chinmayananda 1996: 26-44). What is interesting is that Krishna does not speak, even when it is obvious that Arjuna is looking to him for an answer; in fact, for the whole first chapter of the *Gita*, it is only Arjuna's voice that echoes. Krishna's silence becomes more poignant as it subsequently becomes obvious that he was using this time to observe and assess Arjuna's logic and arguments. Krishna could have easily sought to console Arjuna but he remains content to let Arjuna vent; clearly this was to let Arjuna expend and exhaust his excess of emotion. Allowing Arjuna to do so has two purposes: firstly it acknowledges his simmering emotions indirectly as he is being given the opportunity to express himself, uncontested; secondly, allowing him to vent would ensure that he is undistracted and receptive to whatever is addressed to him thereafter. Similarly, when negotiating, there is value in observing one's counter party and the environment, and importantly, assessing that if there is great emotion at play, it is best to let it expend itself, so that the course of negotiation is not derailed from the effort of trying to rationalize the emotions.

Conclusion

While the three texts come from distinct ancient cultures, it is nevertheless easy to spot the commonalities between them once the right frames have been inserted. And that realization is a lesson in itself. When sitting at the negotiation table, it is easy to assume that there are too many differences between the different stakeholders. Yet with the appropriate frame of reference, it would definitely be easier to spot opportunities and commonalities that can create a more positive atmosphere, leading to a successful conclusion.

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¹For a critical edition of the *Mahabharata*, see the multi-volume set edited by V. S. Sukthankar (1933). For reading pleasure, an abridged version is suggested (see Rajagopalachari 1974).

²It should be highlighted that this is an oversimplification of the characters and issues that are raised in the course of *Mahabharata*. Much of the epic revolves on the concept of *Dharma* and many of the characters characterized as “good” nevertheless make flawed decisions and those who are “bad” are nevertheless capable of *Dharma* (see generally Das 2009).

³As typical of Hinduism, while the *Gita* is not a religious text per se, it has significant religious overtones. Building upon this concept, Krishna subsequently explains in the *Gita* how we are all connected and are part of a higher being, known as *Paramatma*, of which he himself is a form. Dedicating the fruits to him would allow an individual to embark on actions with the right frame of mind (see Chinmayananda 1996: 796-859).

⁴In the eighth century, during the Tang dynasty, a Japanese scholar took many Chinese books back to Japan, including this military classic. The attention of the Western world was first brought to this book by a Jesuit missionary to Beijing, Father J.J. M. Amiot, whose *Art Militaire des Chinois* was published in Paris in 1772. However, his work was criticized by Griffith as more an interpretation than direct translation of Sun Tzu's treatise. In 1905, Captain E.F. Calthrop, R.F.A., then a British Army language student in Japan, translated “The Thirteen Chapters” into English, based on an earlier Japanese translation, and published it in Tokyo. Three years later, he published a new and revised edition in London. In 1910, L. Giles, an Assistant Curator of Oriental Books and Manuscripts in the British Museum, published his translation in London. Across the Atlantic, S.B. Griffith, an American general, published his version of the work in 1963. After that, there have been many more English versions published, both inside and outside China.