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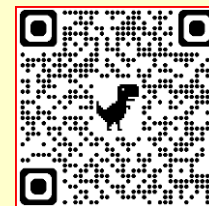
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A Comparative Study of the 1962 and 2020 Sino-Indian Military Conflicts through the Lens of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*

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ABSTRACT

*The Sino-Indian border dispute is a key variable shaping the geopolitical landscape of Asia. This paper aims to explore, through a comparative analysis of the 1962 Sino-Indian border war and the 2020 Galwan Valley conflict, how classical strategic thought from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* provides an analytical framework for understanding modern limited warfare and gray-zone competition in different temporal and spatial contexts. This paper employs a qualitative comparative case study method, selecting core concepts from *The Art of War* such as "strategic planning," "preferring non-military means," "the situation," "deception and asymmetry," and "knowing the enemy and knowing yourself" (intelligence and cognition) to systematically analyze the strategic logic, escalation dynamics, and conflict management models of the two conflicts.*

*The study finds that the 1962 war embodies a typical limited warfare model that uses "military aggression" to achieve political objectives, and its characteristics of "swift victory" and "proactive withdrawal" highly align with Sun Tzu's caution regarding the costs of war. In contrast, the 2020 conflict demonstrated a modern translation of the idea of "subduing the enemy without fighting" into "gray zone competition" within the context of nuclear deterrence, with the conflict itself becoming a long-term process of shaping "momentum." The study also points out that misjudgment of "knowing the enemy" was a key catalyst for escalation in both conflicts. This paper concludes that *The Art of War* not only provides a historical perspective for understanding Chinese strategic culture, but its inherent cost-benefit analysis, emphasis on information asymmetry, and focus on non-military means make it an effective theoretical tool for analyzing strategic competition among major powers.*

KEY WORDS: Sun Tzu's Art of War, Sino-Indian conflict, 1962 Sino-Indian War, Galwan Valley, limited warfare, gray zone, strategic studies

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Motivation

The relationship between China and India is one of the most complex and important bilateral relationships in the 21st-century international system (Muzavisky, 2021). As nuclear-armed neighbors and emerging economies, their interaction not only affects the power balance in Asia but also has profound implications for global strategic stability. At the heart of this relationship lies a border stretching thousands of kilometers and still unresolved. This dispute stems from historical issues inherited from the colonial era and has repeatedly become a flashpoint in bilateral relations during the rise of nationalism and the growth of national power in both countries (Maity, 2025).

The 1962 Sino-Indian border war and the 2020 Galwan Valley clash are two key turning points in this long history of confrontation. The former was a brief but intense conventional war that shaped the strategic tone of mutual distrust between China and India for the next half-century; the latter, after a 45-year period of calm without casualties in hostilities, marked the beginning of a new phase of "high-tech, high-intensity, and normalized standoff" on the Sino-Indian border (Brethouwer, 2022; Muzalevsky, 2021). Why did the same geographical dispute present such different appearances, from "limited hot war" to "deadly conflict in the gray zone," under different historical contexts? What are the similarities and differences in the strategic decision-making logic, escalation control mechanisms, and criteria for determining victory or defeat behind the two conflicts? These questions are not only historically significant but also crucial for predicting and managing risks on the Sino-Indian border today (Conflict on the Sino-Indian Border, 2020).

To gain a deeper understanding, merely describing the events or listing military data is insufficient; an analytical framework that penetrates the surface and touches upon decision-making processes is necessary. As the origin of classical Chinese strategic thought, *The Art of War* has long transcended time and place, profoundly influencing strategic thinking in contemporary military, business, and even political spheres (Dimovski, 2011; Ploumis, 2026; Tzu, 2010). Especially when discussing China's strategic behavior, *The Art of War* is widely regarded as a crucial text for understanding its cultural genes and decision-making preferences (Haerulloh, 2022). Therefore, this paper aims to use the core concepts of this classic military masterpiece to conduct a systematic comparative analysis of two key Sino-Indian conflicts, hoping to reveal the consistent or evolving strategic logic behind them.

1.2 Research Questions

The core question of this study is: How can the strategic framework of Sun Tzu's Art of War help us understand the similarities and differences between the 1962 Sino-Indian border war and the 2020 Galwan Valley conflict in terms of strategic objectives, means selection, escalation control, and situation shaping?

This core problem can be further broken down into three sub-problems:

- 1.2.1 To what extent did the decisions and actions of China and India in the two conflicts conform to or deviate from the core principles of "the Art of War" regarding "attacking the enemy's plans," "knowing the enemy and knowing yourself," and "subduing the enemy without fighting"?
- 1.2.2 From the perspective of the concepts of "form" (tangible strength) and "momentum" (strategic

situation) in Sun Tzu's Art of War, how did the geopolitical, military technology, and national power comparison between 1962 and 2020 shape two completely different conflict patterns?

- 1.2.3 What theoretical insights and policy implications can this comparative analysis offer for understanding the current "new normal" on the Sino-Indian border and predicting the evolution of potential future conflicts?

1.3 Literature Review

This study involves existing literature in three areas: (i) **modern interpretations of Sun Tzu's Art of War**, (ii) **studies on the Sino-Indian border conflict**, and (iii) the connection between strategic thought and practice.

In the modern interpretation of *The Art of War*, scholars have affirmed its contemporary value from multiple dimensions. Research indicates that the essence of Sun Tzu's thought lies in his holistic view of war, considering it an extension of politics, emphasizing cost-effectiveness and the concept of "total victory" (Tzu, 1971). His principles are not only applicable to modern warfare (Haerulloh, 2022; Relevancy in Modern Warfare, 2025), but are also widely used in business competition and leadership research (Dimovski, 2011; Sun Tzu's principles, 2012). Particularly noteworthy is the formal interpretation of *The Art of War* by some scholars using game theory, arguing that Sun Tzu had already grasped concepts such as dominant strategies, minmax, and hybrid strategies, emphasizing the scientific nature of his decision-making logic (Niou & Ordeshook, 1990, 1994). This provides a theoretical foundation for this study to operationalize Sun Tzu's thought into an analytical tool.

In the study of the Sino-Indian border conflict, the literature is mainly divided into historical narratives and contemporary analyses. Research on the 1962 war focuses primarily on its historical roots, India's "Forward Policy," and the catastrophic consequences of the war (Shifting Power, 2025). Analysis of the 2020 Galwan Valley conflict is more concentrated, with scholars exploring the causes of the conflict from multiple perspectives, including geopolitical competition, infrastructure races, and nationalist sentiments (Brethouwer, 2022; China-India Galwan Conflict, 2020; Muzalevsky, 2021). Related reports confirm that this event was the most serious border conflict since 1967, resulting in casualties on both sides, particularly with India publicly acknowledging the deaths of 20 soldiers (Analyzing the 2020 India-China Standoff, 2020; Unravelling the complexities, nd). However, most studies still focus on the causal analysis of the events themselves, with fewer comparing the two conflicts within a unified strategic framework.

Regarding the connection between strategic thought and practice, scholars generally acknowledge the influence of strategic culture on state behavior, but also caution against oversimplifying or essentializing it. A common research approach is to compare Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* with Clausewitz's *On War*, the former considered to represent the Eastern strategic tradition of indirectness, stratagem, and avoidance of war, while the latter represents the Western mindset of directness, decisive battle, and destroying the enemy's will by force (Ploumis, 2026). Such comparisons help highlight the characteristics of different strategic paradigms.

In summary, existing literature has laid a solid foundation for this study, but a significant gap remains: a lack of systematic research that uses the core concepts of *The Art of War* as a unified analytical benchmark to conduct an in-depth comparative analysis of the two vastly different Sino-Indian conflicts of 1962 and 2020. This

paper aims to fill this gap, not only to deepen our understanding of the two conflicts themselves, but also to explore the vitality and applicability of classical strategic thought in analyzing contemporary international conflicts.

1.4 Research Methods and Paper Structure

This study primarily employs the qualitative comparative case study method. This method is suitable for in-depth analysis of two or more historical events with similar backgrounds but different outcomes, in order to explore the underlying causal mechanisms and patterns. This paper selects the 1962 Sino-Indian War and the 2020 Galwan Valley clash as two core cases, using the theoretical concepts of Sun Tzu's **The Art of War** as the analytical framework to compare the similarities and differences between the two in terms of strategic objectives, means employed, conflict processes, and outcomes. Data sources mainly include declassified historical archives, official government statements, academic journal articles, reports from renowned think tanks, and in-depth reports from authoritative media.

This paper is structured as follows: Chapter Two constructs a theoretical framework, operationalizing the core strategic concepts of **The Art of War** for application in case studies. Chapter Three delves into the 1962 Sino-Indian border war, examining how it embodies Sun Tzu's logic of limited warfare. Chapter Four analyzes the 2020 Galwan Valley conflict, exploring its characteristics as a form of modern gray-zone competition. Chapter Five conducts a systematic comparative analysis, summarizing the commonalities and differences in strategic thinking between the two conflicts. Chapter Six concludes the study, summarizing the findings and discussing their theoretical implications and implications for current Sino-Indian relations.

2. Theoretical Framework: Operationalizing the Core Strategic Concepts of Sun Tzu's Art of War

To avoid simply quoting from **The Art of War**, this chapter aims to transform its core concepts into tools that can be used to analyze international conflicts. We will focus on five of the most critical sets of concepts.

2.1 Strategic Planning: Pre-war Systematic Assessment and Planning

"He who wins a battle before it is fought has many calculations in his favor; he who loses a battle before it is fought has few calculations in his favor." (Sun Tzu, **The Art of War**, Chapter 1, "Planning") "Planning" is the starting point of Sun Tzu's thought, emphasizing that before engaging in any conflict, a comprehensive and objective quantitative and qualitative assessment of the fundamental elements of both sides—the "Five Factors" (morality, weather, terrain, general, and law) and the "Seven Considerations" (which ruler is virtuous, which general is capable, etc.)—must be conducted. In modern strategic research, "planning" can be operationalized as **Strategic Net Assessment**, which includes analysis of the following aspects:

- **Politics and Public Opinion (Tao)** : Clarity of national goals, determination of the leadership, domestic public support, and social cohesion.
- **International Environment (Sky)** : Geopolitical landscape, relations between major powers, alliance system, and trends in international public opinion.
- **Geography and Logistics (Ground)** : The geographical environment, climate conditions, infrastructure, and logistical sustainability of the battlefield.

- **Leadership and organization (generals and law)** : The quality of military commanders, the training level of troops, the efficiency of the command and control system, and the discipline of the organization.

Whether a conflict was initiated after careful planning can be assessed by examining whether its strategic objectives are clear, whether the means match the objectives, and whether there are contingency plans for potential risks.

2.2 Strategic Planning and Subduing the Enemy Without Fighting: Priorities of Means and Ideal Goals

"The best strategy is to attack the enemy's plans; next best is to disrupt their alliances; next best is to attack their army; and the worst is to besiege their cities." (Sun Tzu, **The Art of War**, Chapter 13, "Planning an Attack") This statement reveals Sun Tzu's prioritization of conflict tactics. The ideal victory (total victory) is achieved through non-military means, dismantling the enemy's strategic intentions (attacking their plans) or diplomatic alliances (disrupting their alliances), thereby "subduing the enemy without fighting." Direct military confrontation (attacking their army) is a secondary option, while costly wars of attrition (sieges) should be avoided at all costs. This concept can be operationalized as the Spectrum of Conflict :

- **Advanced tactics (strategic maneuvering, diplomatic maneuvering)** : diplomatic deterrence, economic sanctions, legal warfare, information warfare, psychological warfare, and technological blockade.
- **Intermediate-level tactics (military operations)** : limited military strikes, proxy wars, and gray zone operations (such as maritime militia, cyberattacks, and border skirmishes).
- **Low-level tactics (siege)** : Total war, unlimited war of attrition.

When analyzing a conflict, we can observe whether decision-makers prioritized high-level tactics and whether their military operations were designed to avoid sliding into the most costly "siege" mode.

2.3 Form and Momentum: The Dialectical Relationship Between Tangible Power and Strategic Situation

"Therefore, the skillful strategist seeks advantage in the situation, not in the people; thus, he is able to choose the right people and utilize the situation." (Sun Tzu, **The Art of War**, Chapter 1, "The Situation") "Situation" refers to the concrete form of the army, such as troop strength, weaponry, and deployment location; it is static and visible. "Situation," on the other hand, is the kinetic energy and strategic advantage generated by "situation" at a specific time, place, and condition; it is dynamic and intangible. Sun Tzu emphasizes that victory is not simply about brute force through superior "situation," but about skillfully creating and utilizing "situation" to form a favorable strategic position, like "rolling a round stone down a thousand-foot mountain—that is the situation." This concept can be operationalized into an analysis of ****capability**** and ****posture****.

- **Form (capabilities)** : Army size, weapon technology level, logistical infrastructure, economic strength, and technological level.
- **Situation (or situation)** : The deployment and combat readiness of the army, the utilization of the geographical environment, the timing of actions, intelligence advantages, the psychological influence of the opponent, and international diplomatic support.

A successful strategy should be to transform tangible "form" into intangible "momentum," laying the foundation for victory before the conflict even breaks out.

2.4 *The Art of War: Information Asymmetry and Tactical Surprise*

"Warfare is based on deception. Therefore, when capable, feign incapacity; when active, feign inactivity; when near, feign distance; when far, feign nearness." (Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Chapter 1, "Planning") The core of "deception" is to create information asymmetry, mislead the enemy's judgment, and thus seize the initiative. This is not only tactical deception but also strategic maneuvering. In modern conflicts, the application of "deception" is extremely widespread, and it can be operationalized as an analysis of **deception and ambiguity**:

- **Strategic deception** : concealing true strategic intentions, such as military exercises ostensibly for defense that are actually preparations for offense.
- **Tactical ambiguity** : Engaging in "gray zone" operations with blurred boundaries makes it difficult for the opponent to judge the nature of the action, thereby delaying their reaction.
- **Feigning weakness to mislead the enemy** : By using feints or false intelligence, the enemy is lured into making incorrect troop deployments, thereby creating opportunities.

When analyzing a conflict, it is necessary to pay attention to whether and how both sides use information to mislead their opponents, and to assess the effectiveness of such misinformation.

2.5 *Know Your Enemy and Yourself: Intelligence, Cognition, and Misjudgment*

"Know the enemy and know yourself, and you will never be defeated; know yourself but not the enemy, and you will win one and lose one; know neither the enemy nor yourself, and you will be defeated in every battle." (Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Chapter 13, "Planning an Attack") This is the most widely known and fundamental principle in Sun Tzu's thought. It requires commanders not only to understand the enemy's military strength but also to discern their political intentions, decision-making patterns, cultural psychology, strengths, and weaknesses. Simultaneously, they must have a clear understanding of their own strengths, weaknesses, and the costs they can bear. This concept directly corresponds to the analysis of **Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) and Cognitive Domain** in modern strategic research.

- **Know the enemy** : an accurate assessment of the enemy's leadership decision-making style, domestic political pressures, strategic culture, military doctrine, logistical limits, and alliance commitments.
- **Knowing oneself** : having an objective understanding of one's own country's war potential, public opinion resilience, economic capacity, political risks of military operations, and the reliability of allies.
- **Miscalculation** is the direct consequence of "not knowing the enemy" or "not knowing oneself," and it is the primary cause of unexpected escalation of conflict.

Analyzing the causes and processes of conflict and identifying key cognitive misjudgments is key to understanding why it gets out of control or is brought under control.

3. Case Study 1: The 1962 Sino-Indian Border War – A Classic Case of Sun Tzu-Style Limited Warfare

The 1962 Sino-Indian border war is often regarded as a model of modern limited warfare. If examined within the framework of "The Art of War," it can be found that its pre-war planning and conflict resolution highly reflect Sun Tzu's strategic thinking.

3.1 *Pre-war "Strategic Planning": An Imbalanced Strategic Assessment*

The root of the conflict lies in the fundamental differences in the two sides' understanding of the status quo of the border and each other's intentions. On the Indian side, under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's "Forward Policy," India has attempted to unilaterally alter the Line of Actual Control by continuously establishing new outposts. The strategic assessment behind this approach clearly demonstrates a lack of understanding of both the enemy and oneself.

- **Misunderstanding the enemy** : Indian policymakers generally underestimated China's sensitivity to territorial sovereignty issues and its resolve to use force, following the Korean War and the Taiwan Strait crisis. They mistakenly believed that Beijing was preoccupied with domestic economic difficulties (the consequences of the Great Leap Forward) and the Sino-Soviet split, and was unable to launch a large-scale military operation on its southwestern border.
- **is unaware of its own limitations**: it has overestimated its international prestige within the Non-Aligned Movement and its operational capabilities in high-altitude regions. Its frontline troops suffer from severe deficiencies in logistics, winter clothing, and terrain adaptability, and its military preparedness is significantly out of sync with its radical political stance.

In contrast, China's strategic planning was far more meticulous. After repeated unsuccessful diplomatic protests and attempts at negotiation (strategic maneuvering and diplomacy), the Beijing leadership determined that the "Forward Policy" posed a substantial threat and that a limited military strike was necessary to achieve the political objectives of "using force to promote dialogue" and reshaping border rules. Their assessment encompassed the international environment (the Cuban Missile Crisis provided a strategic window of opportunity), geographical and logistical factors (long-term battlefield preparations and material stockpiling), and military capabilities (participating troops had extensive experience in high-altitude warfare).

3.2 *Objectives and Means: "Military conquest" serves political purposes, while "siege of cities" must be strictly prevented.*

The strategic objective of this campaign was extremely clear and limited: not to occupy territory, but to completely shatter India's "forward policy" through a decisive military victory, forcing it back to the negotiating table and ensuring long-term stability in the border region. This objective itself embodies Sun Tzu's philosophy of "not seeking complete victory, but seeking practical benefits."

To achieve this goal, the PLA's actions strictly adhere to the principle of "limited warfare":

- **Limited time** : The main combat operations were concentrated within one month (October 20 to November 21, 1962).

- **Limited Geography** : The operational range is strictly limited to the disputed areas in the east and west, and does not extend into the Indian hinterland.
- **Limited means** : Primarily using light infantry, without deploying the air force, to avoid escalating the war.

This strict control over the scale of war was precisely to avoid falling into the quagmire of a war of attrition (i.e., "siege") that Sun Tzu warned against, which would lead to "prolonged military campaigns and insufficient national resources," and to ensure the cost-effectiveness of military operations.

3.3 Operational Guidance: Shifting "Situation" and Application of "Deception"

At the tactical level, the People's Liberation Army successfully transformed its advantage in "form" into a winning opportunity in "momentum".

- **Strategic Selection** : The campaign was launched before winter, when heavy snow would close the mountains, putting the Indian army under immense logistical pressure, while the PLA had already made preparations. In terms of battlefield selection, superior forces were concentrated on the weak points of the Indian defenses, employing infiltration and encirclement tactics to create absolute advantage in the local battlefield.
- **war is deception** : In the eastern sector, one part of the PLA's main force was engaged in a frontal harassment, while another part conducted a deep penetration through unexpected and rugged paths, directly attacking the Indian army's rear command post and paralyzing its command system. This tactic of "showing its presence in the east and striking when the enemy is unprepared" is a classic application of the art of deception.

In contrast, the Indian army's deployment was rigid, with its forces scattered across multiple isolated outposts, failing to form a cohesive force. Under the PLA's flexible and mobile attacks, it quickly collapsed.

3.4 Conflict Resolution: The Path to "Complete Victory" through Proactive Ceasefire and Troop Withdrawal

The most unexpected outcome of the war was that, after achieving an overwhelming military victory, China unilaterally announced a ceasefire on November 21, 1962, and withdrew to the line of actual control established on November 7, 1959, the following month. This move puzzled the outside world at the time, but from the perspective of Sun Tzu's Art of War, it was the ultimate embodiment of the pursuit of "total victory."

- **Preserving strategic interests** : The objective of military victory has been achieved. Further advance would have resulted in risks such as an excessively long logistical line, increased international intervention (the US and UK have already begun aiding India), and a protracted occupation and counterinsurgency war—a net loss. The proactive withdrawal preserved the strategic gains already achieved and avoided potentially greater costs.
- **Taking the initiative politically** : China's unilateral ceasefire and troop withdrawal demonstrated to the world that it had no intention of expanding its territory, winning the moral and diplomatic initiative and passing the "ball" of peace to India.

The outcome of this war perfectly illustrates Sun Tzu's core idea: war is a tool of politics, and its ultimate goal is to achieve a favorable political situation, rather than simply military conquest.

4. Case Study 2: The 2020 Galwan Valley Conflict – Gray Zone Competition in the Nuclear Age

Entering the 21st century, especially after both China and India became nuclear-armed states, the option of large-scale border war has been virtually ruled out. However, this does not mean the end of conflict, but rather a transformation into a more complex and protracted "gray zone competition." The Galwan Valley clash in 2020 was a product of this competition spiraling out of control.

4.1 Background: The competition of "form" and the rise and fall of "momentum"

The immediate trigger for the 2020 conflict was the infrastructure construction race between the two sides in the border region (Muzavisky, 2021). In recent years, India has vigorously promoted border road construction, particularly the DSDBO highway leading to Daulat Beg Oldi, which has greatly improved its troop deployment and logistical support capabilities in the Aksai Chin region. This move was viewed by China as an attempt to unilaterally change the status quo on the border and erode its strategic buffer zone.

From Sun Tzu's perspective of "situation and circumstances," this is a typical competition to seize "power" (strategic position and control) through changes in "form" (tangible infrastructure such as roads, bridges, airports, and barracks). Both sides are striving to transform their engineering capabilities and economic strength into greater control and faster response capabilities over the disputed area. As both sides actively "build momentum" on the front lines, the number of contact points for patrol teams increases, and the risk of miscalculation and friction rises sharply.

4.2 Conflict Mode: The Violence of "Subduing the Enemy Without Fighting"

The most striking feature of this conflict is that while both sides adhered to the historical tacit understanding of "no firing," they engaged in deadly hand-to-hand combat using primitive cold weapons (such as spiked clubs) (China-India Galwan Conflict, 2020). This seemingly contradictory phenomenon precisely reflects the inherent logic of gray-zone conflicts under nuclear deterrence.

- **The tacit understanding of escalating control** : avoiding the use of firearms is a "firewall" for both sides to prevent the conflict from spiraling out of control and escalating into a hot war.
- **A violent display of resolve** : Using cold weapons to inflict casualties on the enemy is a highly symbolic display of resolve. It sends a strong signal to the enemy: even if the profit is minimal, we are willing to endure and inflict pain to defend our claims.

This "lethal use of non-lethal weapons" can be seen as a distorted modern variant of the idea of "subduing the enemy without fighting." Its goal is no longer to completely avoid bloodshed, but to force the other side to retreat in the struggle for a specific location by imposing unbearable human and political costs within a controllable level of violence.

4.3 Information Warfare and Public Opinion Warfare: Extended Battlefields of "Strategic Planning"

After the conflict broke out, information and public opinion became the second battleground for the two sides.

- **The ambiguity and delay in information dissemination** : China did not release its casualty figures for a considerable period after the incident, while India quickly announced 20 deaths. This difference in information release is itself a tactic. China's ambiguous approach served two purposes: firstly, to cool down domestic public opinion and prevent nationalist sentiment from hijacking decision-making; secondly, it made it difficult for outsiders to accurately assess the scale and intensity of the conflict, thus preserving strategic ambiguity.
- **The struggle for narrative** : Both sides accuse the other of crossing the line first and provoking the conflict. Through the release of satellite images, diplomatic statements, and official media commentary, both sides attempt to construct narratives favorable to themselves domestically and internationally, vying for the moral high ground. This is precisely a manifestation of Sun Tzu's ideas of "diplomatic maneuvering" and "strategic maneuvering" in the modern media environment.

4.4 The Protracted Standoff: The Rebalancing of "Form" and "Power"

Unlike the swift resolution of the 1962 conflict, the Galwan Valley clash saw both China and India amass significant forces along the

border, resulting in a military standoff that lasted for several years. Both sides deployed advanced weaponry and equipment in the high-altitude region and significantly improved logistical facilities to support their long-term troop deployments.

This standoff is itself a contest revolving around "form" and "momentum." It's no longer about short-term tactical victories, but rather:

- **National sustainability** : Whose economic and logistical systems can support large-scale military deployments in high-altitude regions for a longer period of time?
- **Technological advantages** : Who will gain the upper hand in areas such as intelligence surveillance, precision strikes, and unmanned systems?
- **Political endurance** : Whose domestic politics can withstand long-term strategic attrition and the potential risk of renewed friction.

The outcome of this standoff will no longer be determined by a single battle, but by the ebb and flow of the two sides' "forms," which will eventually coalesce into a new "momentum," forcing one side to make concessions at the negotiating table.

4.5 Comparative Analysis: Strategic Evolution from Limited Warfare to Gray Competition

By juxtaposing the conflicts of 1962 and 2020, we can clearly see the inheritance and evolution of the Sino-Indian border conflict model within the framework of Sun Tzu's Art of War.

Table 1 Strategic Evolution from Limited Warfare to Gray Competition

Analysis Dimensions	1962 Sino-Indian border war	2020 Galwan Valley clash	Sun Tzu's Art of War Concept Correspondence
Strategic Objectives	Clear and Limited: Using War to Stop War and Reshape Border Rules	Ambiguous and dynamic: Local power struggles, testing the bottom line	Strategic planning (goal setting)
Main means	Conventional military strikes (military raids)	Gray zone operations (physical confrontations, infrastructure race)	Strategic maneuvering vs. military force (choice of methods)
Conflict Mode	Limited warfare, quick victory	Prolonged standoff, low-intensity friction	Speed is of the essence in war vs. protracted war.
Accurate judgment of win or loss	Clear military victories and political outcomes	A contest of advantages and disadvantages and the ability to sustain long-term losses.	Form vs. Momentum (Definition of Victory)
Upgrade Logic	Misjudging the enemy's resolve led to the outbreak of war.	Unexpected loss of control due to friction in the gray area led to injuries and fatalities.	Know your enemy and know yourself (misjudging the risk)
Information Utilization	Tactical deception (deception)	Strategic ambiguity, information warfare, narrative competition	The Modern Extension of Deception
Conflict End	Unilateral ceasefire and troop withdrawal	Multiple rounds of corps commander-level negotiations, partial disengagement	Undeclared vs. Stalemate Management

Source: This article is compiled from various sources.

The core driving force of evolution:

4.5.1 The stabilizing effect of nuclear deterrence : The existence of nuclear weapons greatly raises the threshold for total war, making a conventional war

like that of 1962 virtually impossible to repeat today. Conflicts are forced to be suppressed within the realm of the "gray zone."

4.5.2 Technological advancements are a double-edged sword : technologies such as satellite reconnaissance and drones make large-scale troop concentrations and

surprise attacks extremely difficult, and the implementation of "deception" tactics becomes even more challenging. However, at the same time, technology also grants both sides stronger monitoring capabilities and more sustained logistical support, making a prolonged stalemate possible.

4.5.3 Symmetry in national power growth : Unlike the vast disparity in national power between the two sides in 1962, today's China and India are both significant economic and military powers. This relative symmetry in power makes it difficult for either side to gain a decisive advantage through a short-term military operation, thus making the conflict more likely to be a protracted war of attrition.

4.5.4 The constraints of globalization : In today's highly interdependent globalized economy, the economic damage caused by large-scale war is unbearable for both sides. Considerations of economic interests have become a crucial factor in preventing the escalation of conflict.

5. In-depth analysis: The strategic logic and zero-sum game mentality of border geopolitics

Based on the theoretical framework and case comparisons presented above, to further enrich this research, we must delve into the specific operational logic of geostrategic geography in the Sino-Indian border conflict, as well as its strategic positioning within the context of great power rivalry. The following are supplementary and in-depth chapters of this research paper.

In Sun Tzu's "Art of War," the geographical environment is not only the backdrop of warfare but also the foundation of "strategic advantage." A strategic geographical analysis of the Galwan Valley and the western Aksai Chin region can more clearly demonstrate how both sides achieve strategic deterrence through terrain control.

5.1 Zero-sum game and watershed effect in geostrategy

From a strategic geographical perspective, the location of the actual control line in the Aksai Chin region has key strategic implications. Studies have pointed out that there is an objective watershed on the western edge of Aksai Chin, with the Karakash River originating to the east and the Shyok River system to the west (Circumplanet, 2022). Currently, China's actual control line in this region has actually crossed this natural watershed and reached the Shyok River valley.

This constitutes a very high level of strategic deterrence:

5.1.1 Advantages of troop deployment : Troops can enter the Shyok Valley from here at any time. The valley is mostly high mountains and dangerous obstacles leading to Leh, a major town in Ladakh, India, making it difficult to establish an effective defense (Circumplanet, 2022).

5.1.2 Causes of strategic stalemate: This "siege" deployment forces India to double its military and material investment on the front line to ensure security, thus falling into a vicious cycle of infrastructure and military buildup (Circumplanet, 2022). From the perspective of Sun Tzu's Art of War, this is a deterrence strategy that is "harmful to others and not beneficial to one"—we have to pay huge maintenance costs, but the benefit is to make the

opponent feel extremely insecure, thereby achieving strategic suppression (Circumplanet, 2022).

This approach of transforming "geographical control" into "strategic psychological deterrence" reflects the zero-sum game thinking in modern geopolitics. Although giving up such advantageous areas is conducive to building mutual trust, under the overall consideration of great power competition, this strategic decision of "applying pressure in the west to respond to pressure in the east (southern Tibet)" is often regarded as a necessary means of "losing one side and gaining another"(Circumplanet, 2022).

5.2 Broad Strategic Vision: India as a "Major Adversary in Secondary Battlefields"

If the research perspective is elevated from a single border conflict to the grand strategic level, China's strategic positioning of India can be understood more accurately. Scholars have pointed out that in China's overall geostrategic layout, India is regarded as "the main opponent in the secondary battlefield" (Duowei News, 2021).

This positioning explains why the conflict exhibits a long-term competitive and cooperative characteristic of "struggle without breaking apart":

- **Economic and security go hand in hand**: There is room for cooperation between the two sides in the economy, but they also restrict each other (Duowei News, 2021).
- **Opportunistic competition** : With the changes in the international situation (such as the US-China rivalry and the global pandemic), both sides are looking for opportunities to change the situation, which makes border conflicts not only territorial disputes, but also tactical probing under the great power rivalry (Institute for National Defense and Security Studies, 2020; Duowei News, 2021).

This "long-term" adversary relationship is in line with the idea in Sun Tzu's Art of War that "the skillful warrior does not seek victory from others, but from the situation." China regards India as a long-term strategic adversary rather than a single border threat. Therefore, its military deployments (such as increasing troops and stationing heavy troops in Ladakh) and infrastructure development (such as the tunnel and camp construction mentioned above) are all aimed at accumulating long-term strategic advantages (situation) rather than pursuing a single tactical victory (Institute for National Defense and Security Studies, 2020; Eurasian Systems Science Research Association, 2024).

5.3 The social impact of conflict and marginalization of identity

Strategic studies should not be limited to military and geopolitical issues, but should also include the impact of conflict on social structures. The 1962 war had a profound impact on Chinese immigrant communities in India, leading to their identity issues and marginalization in social status (Thampi, 2007).

From a strategic psychological perspective, border conflicts not only occur on the military line, but also in the public opinion field of domestic society. The lack of information and low visibility of information about Chinese immigrants in India reflects how political conflicts directly shape social perception (Thampi, 2007). This phenomenon of "marginalization" is itself a byproduct of war, and often becomes a breeding ground for public opinion mobilization and patriotic sentiment in subsequent strategic decision-making, thus affecting the space for diplomatic negotiations. For decision-makers, realizing how "overseas immigrants" and "domestic national

sentiment" are affected by border conflicts is an indispensable part of practicing Sun Tzu's "strategic planning" to assess "the Way (public opinion cohesion)" and "people's hearts".

5.4 Implications of Core Conclusions

Based on the above in-depth analysis, the two conflicts between China and India and the subsequent standoff reveal a core conclusion: China-India relations have entered a state of "strategic long-term standoff".

5.4.1 Geography is the form, and deterrence is the momentum : the terrain and the configuration of the actual control line in the border area have become the core tools for both sides to carry out strategic deterrence. This configuration is based on the overall strategic perspective of the border game, rather than a simple border dispute (Circumplanet, 2022).

5.4.2 The shift in strategic positioning: positioning India as the "major adversary in the secondary battlefield" means that future Sino-Indian border conflicts will be more politicized, protracted and systematic, rather than traditional sudden military actions (Duwei News, 2021).

5.4.3 A new interpretation of Sun Tzu's Art of War : Modern technology and nuclear deterrence have changed the cost of "military conquest," but Sun Tzu's insights into "situation," "strategic planning," and "political objectives" have become the key to explaining why both sides can continue to increase troop numbers after a conflict, yet try their best to avoid a full-scale war.

In future strategic research, the assessment of "non-contact conflict" and "social resilience" should be further strengthened, because these non-traditional battlefields are playing a more profound role in the contemporary Sino-Indian game than traditional border conflicts (Circumplanet, 2022; Duwei News, 2021).

5.5 Application of Sun Tzu's Art of War

5.5.1 Know yourself and know your enemy

Sun Tzu emphasized the principle of "know yourself and know your enemy, and you will never be defeated." In 1962, China's underestimation of India's military capabilities and strategic intentions led to an unexpected victory. However, India has gradually strengthened its defensive capabilities through subsequent military modernization, as evidenced in the 2020 conflict. The difference in understanding between the two sides regarding military deployments and strategic intentions along the border influenced the outcome of the conflict.

5.5.2 Speed is of the essence in war.

Sun Tzu mentioned "speed is of the essence in war," emphasizing the importance of swift action. In 1962, China launched an attack in a short period, quickly seizing important high ground, catching India off guard. In 2020, the standoff between the two sides lasted for a considerable time, demonstrating the necessity of rapid response and flexible adjustments in modern warfare.

5.5.3 To wait in comfort for the enemy to tire themselves out.

Sun Tzu mentioned the strategy of "waiting at ease for the enemy to tire," which means taking advantage of the enemy's fatigue to achieve victory. In the 2020 conflict, both sides deployed troops in high-altitude areas, posing a tremendous test to the soldiers' physical strength and endurance. India's defensive strategy during this period

demonstrated its resilience under high pressure, echoing Sun Tzu's strategy.

5.5.4 Situation and Geographical Advantage

Sun Tzu emphasized the importance of terrain. In 1962, China successfully established a defensive line on high ground, leveraging its familiarity with and advantage in the terrain. In 2020, both sides were locked in a stalemate in complex terrain, making the outcome of the battle even more unpredictable.

5.6 Research Implications

This paper uses the core strategic concepts of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* as an analytical framework to conduct a systematic comparative study of the 1962 Sino-Indian border war and the 2020 Galwan Valley conflict. The study finds that although the two conflicts differed greatly in their historical context, technological conditions, and manifestations, Sun Tzu's strategic thought still provides profound insights into their underlying logic.

The 1962 war was a textbook example of a limited war, modeled after Sun Tzu's art. It began with meticulous strategic calculations of the enemy's intentions and capabilities. After diplomatic maneuvering failed, it decisively shifted to military force to achieve political objectives. Its operational guidance fully utilized shifts in the situation and deception, ultimately achieving a decisive victory by proactively halting fire and withdrawing troops, thus avoiding prolonged attrition. Both the initiation and conclusion of this war demonstrated a high degree of awareness of the costs of war and its political objectives.

The conflict of 2020 and the ensuing protracted standoff reflect the complex evolution of Sun Tzu's thought in the context of the nuclear age and globalization. The option of large-scale military campaigns has been sealed off, and competition has shifted to a long-term gray-area struggle revolving around infrastructure (form) and strategic control (power). The ideal of "subduing the enemy without fighting" has been distorted into the brutal reality of inflicting pain within controllable violence thresholds to force the other side to back down. Information warfare and the competition for public opinion have become new battlegrounds for "strategic maneuvering" and "diplomatic maneuvering." The outcome of the conflict is no longer determined by a single battle, but rather by the long-term depletion of national power, technology, and political will.

A comparison of the two conflicts reveals a core commonality: the violation of the principle of "knowing yourself and your enemy" is the root cause of the outbreak or escalation of conflict. India's strategic miscalculation in 1962 and the mutual testing and misinterpretation of each other's bottom lines in the forward areas in 2020 both demonstrate how important accurate intelligence and clear self-awareness are in complex strategic interactions.

The theoretical implication of this study is that it verifies the enduring vitality of "The Art of War" as an analytical tool. It is not merely a tactical guide or a symbol of Eastern mysticism; its inherent ideas regarding cost-effectiveness, information asymmetry, prioritization of means, and the dialectic of strength and situation can fully engage in dialogue and integration with modern strategic research theories (such as deterrence theory, game theory, and limited war theory).

For current policymakers, the lesson of this study is that, in the highly sensitive powder keg of the Sino-Indian border, they must strive to avoid repeating the mistake of "not knowing the enemy, not knowing themselves." Both sides need to establish more reliable crisis communication mechanisms, conduct more prudent

assessments of the potential escalation risks of gray-zone operations, and recognize that, under the current strategic balance, any attempt to unilaterally and completely change the status quo could trigger a costly and protracted confrontation. Returning to the fundamental principles of Sun Tzu, "not fighting" is always the highest wisdom, and "strategic planning" is always the first priority.

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