



圍魏救趙

Wéi Wèi Jiù Zhào

Strategy 2 Besiege Wei to Rescue Zhao

Attack where he is unprepared, appear where unexpected.

Sun Zi, *The art of War*

When the enemy is too strong to attack directly, then attack something he holds dear. Know that in all things he cannot be superior.

Somewhere there is a gap in the armor, a weakness that can be attacked instead. If the enemy is on campaign, his home defense will be weak, if his army is fast, his baggage trains will be slow, if the army well equipped, the treasury will be at a loss. 3

3 During the incessant fueding between the various kingdoms of the Warring States period, any kingdom that attacked another was in danger of being attacked by a third kingdom from the rear. This strategy was used to maintain a certain degree of military status quo. If any one kingdom attacked another, the rest would sit back and watch the outcome. But if it looked like one kingdom was becoming too powerful, the other states would unite to cut the

Warring States Period China

This strategy derives its name from a famous incident that occurred in 354 B.C. At this time one of China's most renowned strategists, *Sun Bin*, (a descendent of Sun Zi) was an advisor to the king of Qi. Sun had earlier been at the court of Wei, but another minister, *Pang Juan*, became jealous of Sun's cleverness. Through court intrigues, he had Sun framed as a spy, sentenced to mutilation, and imprisoned. Sun escaped (see Chapter 27) and fled to Qi.

Several years later, the king of Wei appointed the same Pang Juan as commander of the army and sent him to attack the capital of Zhao. The king of Zhao immediately appealed to Qi for help.

The king of Qi consulted his advisors who all spoke in favor of rushing to aid their ally, only Sun Bin recommended against attacking.

Sun advised, *"To intervene between two warring armies is like trying to divert a tidal wave by standing in its path. It would be better to wait until both armies have worn themselves out."*

The king agreed to wait. The siege of Zhao had lasted more than a year when Sun Bin decided the time was ripe to come to Zhao's aid. The king of Qi appointed Prince Tian Ji as general and Sun as military advisor.

Tian Ji wanted to attack the Wei forces directly to lift the siege of Zhao, but again Sun advised against direct intervention saying, *"Since most of Wei's troops are out of the country engaged in the siege, their own defense must be weak. By attacking the capital of Wei, we will force the army to return to defend their own capital thereby lifting the siege of Zhao while destroying the Wei forces in turn."*

ambitious state down to size. This went on for several hundred years, but in the end, the Warring States rulers neglected this strategy and the kingdom of Qin was finally able to conquer all of China.

Tian Ji agreed to the plan and divided his army into two parts, one to attack the capital of Wei, and the other to prepare an ambush along the route to the capital.

When the Wei general Pang Juan heard that the capital was being attacked, he rushed his army back to its defense. Weakened and exhausted from the year-long siege and the forced march, the Wei troops were completely caught by surprise in the ambush and suffered heavy losses.

Zhao was thus rescued while Pang Juan barely escaped back to Wei to recoup his losses. Sun Bin would later defeat his nemesis Pang Juan using another classic strategy (see Chapter 28)

Han Dynasty China

After having defeated Wei, the Han general, *Han Xin*, led his army through the Jing River gorge to subdue Zhao. The king of Zhao in turn mobilized his army and set up fortified positions just in front of the mouth of the gorge where the Han army would have to exit.

Han Xin, knowing the most logical place for an ambush would be at the exit, halted his army some thirty *Li* 4 from the mouth.

During the night, Han Xin ordered two thousand of his light cavalry to muffle their horse's hooves and secretly make their way through underbrush to set up an observation post overlooking the enemy's encampment. Each man was furthermore instructed to carry a red flag.

Han Xin told his commanders, "*When the Zhao forces see me march out, they are sure to abandon their fortifications and come in pursuit. Then you must enter their walls with all speed, tear down the Zhao flags, and set up the red flags of Han instead.*"

The next day Han Xin ordered the main body of his army to line up with their backs against the river. When the Zhao troops saw this they rejoiced in their assured victory since it was a well-known rule of war to never fight with water at your back.

4 One li equals approximately 0.3 miles.

The Thirty-Six Strategies of Ancient China - S. H. Verstappen

Han Xin moved first, launching an attack against the Zhao positions. After a while the Han feigned a retreat and fled back to the main body still lined up along the river. The Zhao forces, feeling confident in their advantage of terrain and superior numbers, pursued the Han to the river where they engaged in a fierce battle.

As Han Xin had anticipated, the Zhao forces completely abandoned their camp leaving only a handful of soldiers behind. When the Han cavalymen hiding in the mountains saw the Zhao army deserting their camp, they knew the time had come.

They charged down the mountain, entered the compound and quickly killed the remaining Zhao guards. Then they tore down the Zhao banners and replaced them with the red flags of Han.

Meanwhile, the Zhao forces were unable to gain any advantage in the desperate fighting along the river, and so were about to retreat to their camp when they saw the Han flags flying behind the ramparts.

The Zhao soldiers, believing that the Han had already captured their leaders, panicked and fled in all directions to escape.

The Han then closed in from both the river and the camp to attack on two fronts, inflicting a severe defeat and capturing the king of Zhao.

Warring States Period China

Duke Wen of Qin had decided to invade Wei, so he called in the feudal nobles to lay out his plans for attack. However, he was interrupted by the laughter coming from one of the nobles named Kong Zichu.

"May I ask the source of your amusement?" asked the duke.

"I was laughing at a man in my neighborhood and some gossip I heard," replied Kong. *"It seems one day he was walking home with his wife when he spotted a lovely maiden gathering mulberry leaves by the roadside. No sooner did he escape his wife to go flirt with the girl when, upon turning around, he saw another man making love to his wife. I was just thinking about the story and I couldn't help but laugh."*

Besiege Wei to Rescue Zhao

Seeing the moral of this story Duke Wen canceled his invasion plans and recalled his army from its march. No sooner had the Qin army returned when they were sent out to stop an invasion on their own northern border by an unexpected enemy.

Summary

To confront a powerful opponent in a head-to-head contest of strength is the most costly and least favorable method of war. Instead, while the enemy is preoccupied with other objectives you attack something of value that he has left behind unguarded. When he is forced to break off his current campaign in order to rescue what he has lost, you can lead his disheartened forces into a trap.

