

## Observe the Fire on the Opposite Shore



# 隔岸觀火

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## Strategy 9

### Observe the Fire on the Opposite Shore

*To remain disciplined and calm while waiting for disorder to appear amongst the enemy is the art of self-possession.*

Sun Zi, *The Art of War*

Delay entering the field of battle until all the other players have become exhausted fighting amongst themselves. Then go in full strength and pick up the pieces.

### Chinese Folktale

One day a clam exposed on the river bank opened its shell to take in the sun. A snipe came over to peck at the exposed flesh of the clam, which quickly closed its shell to clamp the bird's beak.

*"If no rain comes in the next two days, there will be a dead clam,"* said the snipe.

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*"If you don't get your beak free in the next two days, there will be a dead snipe," replied the clam.*

Then along came a fisherman who easily caught them both.

### **Warring States Period China**

Wei was at war with Han who called upon Qi for help. The marquis of Qi summoned his ministers and asked them, *"Would it be better for us to go to Han's relief immediately or should we wait?"*

Some advised an immediate expedition before Han was conquered but one advisor disagreed. *"Have you not heard that when two tigers fight one will be killed and the other crippled?"*

*Neither the troops of Han nor Wei are yet exhausted and were we to go to Han's rescue we would simply be a substitute victim for Wei's armies and our forces would soon be taking orders from Han.*

*At present Wei is intent on having Han, and when Han is about to perish she will surely send another plea for help. We should therefore make a secret treaty with Han offering our support but delay sending any aid until Wei is seriously weakened."*

The marquis agreed and gave the envoys secret assurances that he would join their side and sent them back to Han. Believing that Qi was wholly behind them, Han fought five battles and lost each one. Only when Han was about to fall did Qi send in her troops who crushed the weakened Wei forces at Maling.

With Wei and Han now both near collapse the marquis of Qi forced both to submit to his sovereignty and become vassals of Qi.

### **Three Kingdoms Period China**

In the early years of the Three Kingdoms Period the warlord *Cao Cao* had defeated and killed his rival *Yuan Shao* in the battle of Guandu.

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After his death, Yuan's three sons began fighting over the succession. Cao Cao decided to launch another attack, but as soon as he began to mobilize his troops the sons united their forces against him.

Then one of his ministers, *Guo Jian*, said, "*When we attacked we provided the three sons a common enemy to unite them. Let us bide our time and allow them to resume fighting amongst themselves. After they have weakened themselves we can attack again.*"

Cao Cao withdrew his army and soon the Yuan brothers renewed their squabbling. The elder brother was angry because his father had named his middle brother as successor. The youngest brother supported the middle brother. Eventually the two younger brothers won out and the eldest brother was killed.

During this time Cao Cao had started attacking outlying provinces. By the time the eldest brother was killed, the two remaining brothers feared engaging Cao Cao and instead fled to a distant province in the northeast to seek the aid of a nomadic chief named *Gongsun Gang*.

Some ministers urged Cao Cao to pursue the brothers before they could elicit the help of the barbarians, but Cao Cao ordered his troops to withdraw and assured his minister that Gongsun would soon send him the heads of the two brothers.

Shortly thereafter a courier brought the two heads neatly wrapped and boxed. When asked by the confounded ministers for an explanation Cao Cao told them, "*If I had attacked the brothers, Gongsun would assume that he would be next to fall under my dominion and his logical choice would be to unite with the brothers against me.*

*But if I provided no threat to Gongsun then the success of the two brothers would be his next immediate threat. Since I did not present the threat, Gongsun was able to eliminate his next possible threat then and there."*

## Hojo Regency Japan

In 1583 the great general Toyotomi Hideyoshi was positioning his forces against Akechi Mitsuhide in what would be the battle of

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Yamazaki. Shortly after the battle had engaged, Tsetsui Junkeian, an ally of Mitsuhide, arrived on the scene. Impressed by the superior forces of Hideyoshi, he refused to attack but instead ordered his men to line up in battle formation on a hill above the Horagatoge pass where he could watch the battle before deciding which general to side with.

Seeing Hideyoshi gaining the advantage he betrayed his ally and sent his troops over to Hideyoshi's side.

This incident was never forgotten and henceforth the Japanese equivalent of *Observe the Fire on the Opposite Shore* is known as "to wait at Horagatoge."

### Summary

When there are several players each competing with the other to attain the same goal, restrain yourself from being drawn into the fray. While it may seem opportunity is slipping past, wait and watch. Either the goal will reveal itself as not worth fighting for, or you can attain it later with far less effort.

