

Book Review
By
Afsah Qazi

**Robert Greene, *The 33 Strategies of War*
(London: Profile Books, 2006), pp. 471**

The book '*33 strategies of war*' is written by Robert Greene, author of three other bestsellers. Greene writes mostly about the issues related to power; about strategies of how to achieve it, how to dominate and stand victorious against enemies and how to gain mastery and success in life. He holds a degree in Classical studies from the University of Wisconsin—Madison. He has worked as an editor, writer, translator as well as a story developer in Hollywood.

As the name indicates, the book discusses strategies that would ensure success if followed during and before war (while preparing), helping to meet the ultimate ends for which the war is fought. Corresponding to the number of strategies, the book has 33 chapters, each discussing a single strategy in detail. The strategies have been categorized under five different forms of warfare including self-directed warfare, organizational, defensive, offensive and unconventional warfare, dividing the book into five parts. Greene has thoroughly filtered the annals of history to search for events and examples relevant to each strategy clearly displaying its evolution, execution and effectiveness, and also the consequences in case it is not adopted. A single event has been discussed under different strategies to show that how a mixture, capable of flowing, and shifting like a fluid, proved efficient, instead of a rigid and coherent model.

All chapters follow a consistent pattern where a strategy's introduction and definition are followed by discussion of historical events showing its existence and repeated usage since the earliest times. Then there are the keys to warfare extricated from author's interpretation of these examples and events. Next is the description of an image, visualizing which we can see a particular strategy at work. Each chapter ends with a mention of the situations under which a strategy can be reversed. This pattern represents author's deep understanding about the subject; he clearly marks the strategies which cannot be reversed in any case; in every case you must hit the enemy's centre of gravity, control the dynamic and must be conceptually clear about the exit strategy before entering a war.

The book is a meticulous and praiseworthy work and a must read for the students of security, war and strategy. It helps to improve the basic understanding about the nature and characteristics a practical and perfect strategy must and should possess. It is an elaborate research into the life histories of the greatest men known to world, to many of whom Greene refers repetitively. These include Hannibal, Julius Ceaser, Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Frederick the Great, Karl Von Clausewitz, Napoleon, Clemens Von Metternich, Queen Elizabeth, Alfred Hitchcock, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Mao Tse Tung, Muhammad Ali and Henry Kissinger. Various phases of an individual's life have been discussed to show successes ensured by strategic mastery in one phase and failures and devastation met due to its absence in another phase.

Reference to men belonging to diverse fields such as politics, statecraft, sports, entertainment and social progress challenges the conventional understanding about strategy as art of the general showing that others can equally master the art. In fact many of these people were as adept strategists as the generals, sometimes even better than them. This broad spectrum of references also shows the usefulness and applicability of these strategies in human lives as Greene considers human life also a battle field.

A true strategist, according to the book must have emotional-self control, subtlety, fluidity, presence of mind and a mastery over the art of deception if he aims to surprise the enemy with the un-expected. He/she maneuvers perfectly and hits where it hurts the most and makes enemy lose morale. Ensuring that enemy's targets are missed frustrates him making him prone to mistakes which play into your hands; Muhammad Ali - at 20 did exactly the same to defeat and ruin Sonny Liston's career, the then boxing champion. Victory is always seductive, so a differentiation between a gamble and a risk must be very clear in addition to being clear about how and where to end a war so that going farther does not make the victory a pyrrhic one.

Greene has pondered over the irrefutable fact that understanding human mind, psychology and exploiting enemy's emotions, all are central to mastering the art of strategizing; make your enemies underestimate you, do what is least expected, be it ordinary or extra-ordinary and encircle them with all roads leading to Rome and your strategy will succeed. Napoleon's destruction followed this very pattern; Metternich studied his psychology, targeted his dissatisfaction with his wife and exploited his love for women, kept him unaware of what he was up to, in the end surprising him with the un-expected and unforeseen.

The author has massively quoted strategists and historians from Sun Tzu to Thucydides in an attempt to uncover the fundamental principles guiding competition

or combat. To provide an apt understanding about grand strategy Greene refers to Alexander's first campaigns against Macedonia and Persia, as an eccentric prince at 20; people doubted him, being unaware of the new way of thinking and acting he had developed. Only after he succeeded, a grand-strategic consistency could be seen in all his zigzag maneuvers. Greene emphasizes on timeless principles of war and strategy which call for the alignment of ends to available means instead of doing the opposite. A lack of innovation and dynamism in strategy formulation and execution and its blend with obsession, lack of foresight and miscalculation is a perfect recipe for disaster.

This book provides a thorough insight into the jargons frequently used in strategic studies. It is a reflection of author's strict adherence to realist approach which is central to both the concept and practice of war. It is highly informative, well-researched and easy to understand and can be considered a complete guide on war and strategy. However the readers, having a prior familiarization with these concepts will be in a better position to grasp the contents of the book. Strategy and war, as per the book are always dynamic with no precedent to be followed blindly, since this slavish following kills both individuality and dynamism.