

## The Tao of Strategy: How Seven Eastern Philosophies Help Solve Twenty-First-Century Business Challenges

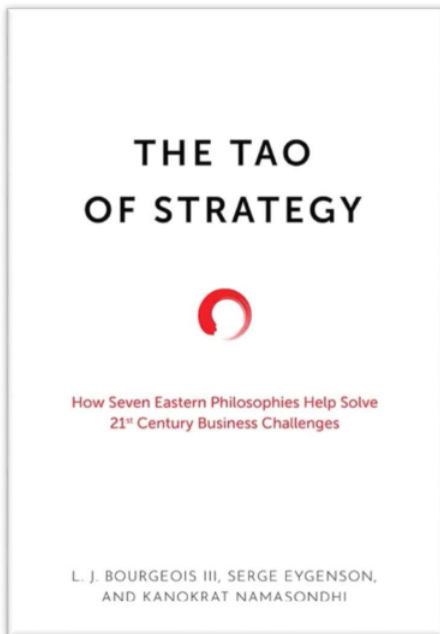
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**An Eastern touch for contemporary biz problems**

[BY T.T. SRINATH](#)

*Good strategy, Eastern principles suggest, is about balance, the middle way and moderation*

In 1949 Mao's PLA, breached the last stronghold of General Chiang Kai-shek's KMT party and forced Chiang to retreat to the Island of Taiwan. The



PLA's decisive victory was attributed to several factors, yet what stood out was the game of GO, a Chinese game that preceded Chess by several hundred years. GO, like chess, is a game of strategy. Yet unlike chess where one wins by capturing the opponent's king, GO is won by slowly extending control over territory.

This is the philosophy on which, the book in review, *The Tao of Strategy*, is based. Every lesson the book shares with us is soaked with Eastern philosophy. What is Eastern philosophy and what is the strategy, as it suggests?

Eastern philosophy advocates the need to balance the human mind, through mindfulness and awareness. Strategy, in Eastern thought, is evocative; like the sun that disarms by merely establishing its presence. As advocated in the

West, strategy comes from a place of knowledge and is provocative, like the 'wind', that establishes its power through strength. The Sun makes no show of strength, yet it can subjugate without fuss.

Gestalt psychology, a very Western idea, yet born from Eastern inspiration, speaks of a 'fertile void', a state of unknowing, yet feverishly alive to possibilities. Gestalt says, endorsing the Eastern view, that strategy is emergent, not predetermined nor predicated.

### **Realised strategy**

In Western thought, strategy is 'intended', i.e.: thought out in advance, pre-planned and deliberated or intentional. In Eastern thought the 'belief' is that between the time when the intended strategy is executed and the results achieved, several things may happen. Thus Eastern thought acknowledges what is called, not 'intended strategy' but instead, 'realised strategy'.

'Realised strategy' is, therefore, 'emergent strategy'.

Like in a Jazz performance, where musicians assemble having no preconceived score, being present and accepting the notes that emerge in the moment, 'realised strategy', lives and works through what is defined as 'negative capability.'

Negative capability is counter-intuitive and is the ability to tolerate uncertainty, doubt, and ambiguity yet also capable of pursuing ideals of beauty, perfection and sublimity even when it leads us to intellectual confusion and uncertainty.

Thus the book invites each of us, to adopt the Eastern concept of 'cultivating a beginner's mind'; an attitude that is curious and enquiring, and willing to let go of the illusion of control by embracing detachment and acceptance.

### **The middle way and moderation**

The book 'Adjusts Our Lenses' and helps us understand that strategy isn't something we have, it is something we do and have to keep doing to support and grow a successful organisation. Good strategy, Eastern principles suggest, is about balance, the middle way and moderation.

All these thoughts, which the book emphatically states and helps us recognise, come from an evocative approach, which is the touchstone of Eastern thought and philosophy.

As we progress through the pages of the book, we learn lessons on strategy from the Bhagavad Gita, The Tao Te Ching, from the wisdom handed by The Buddha and from the teachings of Confucius.

The authors write on page 3, “This book is ultimately about you. As a decision maker, you can impact yourself, your family, the people around you, your organisation and your community through countless large and small (strategic) decisions you make.”

### Presence of mind

Strategy thus, as Eastern minds articulate, is our search for the fulfilment of purpose; it is existential. Those who may read this review might be compelled to ask, “What is new in this book that has not been already written about?”

This book is about presence of mind. If the mind is to survive the constant battle with the unexpected, two qualities are essential. The first, is an intellect that even in the moment of deep darkness retains a trace of inner glow that will light up its path and the second, courage to go where that faint light leads. While, as the authors admit, Western analytical tools, provide a process of understanding industry and competition, true insights can only be achieved through what this book constantly reminds us of, namely, ‘having a beginner’s mind’; a clear-mindedness and disassociation from preconceptions; a state of mind characterised by emotional detachment from outcomes and the ability to abandon one’s preconceived notions.

The book is unique for it speaks of strategy, as ‘the art of war’. It emphasises that strategy is about mindfulness, being patient and having faith. All these are not spoken of at strategic meetings, for such ideas are considered amorphous, ‘touchy & feely’, and sometimes ‘illogical.’ This is where strategy as advocated in many organisations ‘bites the dust.’

So, ultimately as the three authors of the book, who have spent hours distilling wisdom from the East say, echoed in the words of the poet TS Elliott, '(strategy)

Will help us in not ceasing from exploration (and in) the end all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time (from four quartets).'

*(The reviewer is a visiting professor at the Great Lakes Institute of Management, Chennai and is an organisational and behavioural consultant.)*

**Title: The Tao of Strategy**

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