

Richard Bozulich on Kissinger on China and Go

One of the themes that runs through Henry Kissinger's recently published book *On China* is that the Chinese leadership employs go (*weiqi*) strategies in their domestic policies and in their relationships with other countries. This is an old and flawed thesis propagated by individuals who have only the most rudimentary knowledge of the subtle strategies of go. It was first proposed in the 1970s in a book called *The Protracted Game: A Wei-Ch'i Interpretation of Maoist Revolutionary Strategy* by Scott Archer Boorman. The author's thesis was that Chinese Communist insurgency used go strategies in taking over China and that the Vietnamese were using go strategies (even though go was never part of Vietnamese culture) while the United States believed that it was playing chess.

Mr. Kissinger is certainly a very smart person with vast knowledge about China, and I enjoyed reading his book with the many valid insights he had about that country. However, I would venture to say from what he has written is that his knowledge of go is probably limited to the rule that the object of the game is to control territory and that a stone can be captured when surrounded.

Go is a difficult game to master. It takes years of intense study and countless games need to be played to gain an understanding of the subtle principles on which its strategy is based. It is in fact rare that the leader of a country — a politician, a statesman, a diplomat — has the time to master such abstruse art.

I would argue that international relations, government policy, economic policy, diplomacy, military strategy — fields of expertise required of the leadership of a country — do not need go as a strategic model. Commonsense will usually suffice. If go did not exist, strategic thinking between opponents on the world stage would be much the same as it is today.

In contrast to Mr. Kissinger's thesis that go is the basis of the strategic planning of the Chinese leadership, I would argue that the policies of the Chinese leadership are more akin to chess than to go.

The object of chess is to protect the king at all cost, and, from the standpoint of the present Chinese leadership, that means protecting the Communist Party, even though the principles of Marx and Lenin have long ago been discreetly abandoned.

This is of course a trait of all authoritarian governments throughout the world: they are loathe to give up their power. As can be seen in the turmoil that is currently going on in the Middle East, this trait is not confined to the Chinese.

The Chinese of course have their own version of chess called *xiangqi*. In contrast to Western chess or Japanese chess (*shogi*), in which it is imperative to get your king into a safe haven (using the move of castling in chess or spending a number of moves securing your king into a well-defended enclave as in *shogi*), the king in Chinese chess is confined

Kissinger on China and Go

to a 3x3 area of the board called “the palace”. The king is not allowed to move outside this area, but inside it, it can move in any direction. Inside the palace there are also two Guards. They must also remain inside the palace to protect the king, but they are only allowed to move diagonally.

The palace in Chinese chess is analogous to the Forbidden City and the emperors of old who occupied it. **The Emperor can do anything he wants — he has absolute power.** The only thing he cannot do is leave the Forbidden City.

In China today the Communist Party is now the “palace”. Its leadership is the king and the guards are the party functionaries. They are all secure inside the palace walls or within the framework of the Communist Party. The citizenry is under their complete control. They set the laws, compel the courts to interpret it as they demand, set economic policies, can confiscate private property, and so on.

In their international business relationships, one could argue that the Chinese also use Japanese chess (*shogi*) ideas. Recently, Chinese acquired under license proprietary technologies from French, German, and Japanese railway companies to develop their high-speed rail system. After mastering this technology, they then use it to compete against these countries to sell this same technology to other countries at a lower price, which is against the spirit of the agreements they made with the countries they purchased it from. In Japanese chess, when you capture a piece, it becomes part of your own arsenal. When the Chinese capture foreign technology, they feel that it is theirs to use for their own benefit. In almost every field the Chinese seem to have the attitude of “What’s mine is mine, what’s yours is negotiable.”

Of course, the Chinese do not consciously or even subconsciously think in terms of chess or even go strategy. Like every other country in the world they formulate their policies and make their decisions based on what they believe is in their best interest. What is unique about their bargaining and negotiating strategies is that they leave little room for compromise — an inflexibility which is the antithesis of go strategy.

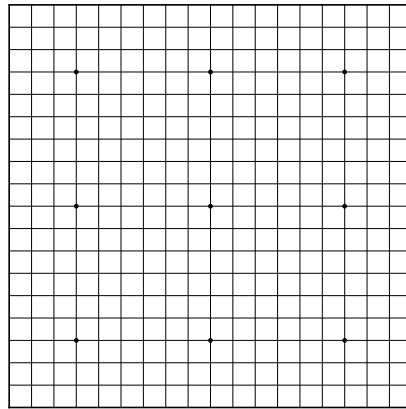
Flexibility is an important attitude for a strong go player to have. There are 361 playing points on the go board. You can’t control them all. You have to expect your opponent to control a large number of them. All you have to do is to control only one more point than your opponent in order to win. You must be willing to cede territory to your opponent in such a way that you can gain more territory elsewhere on the board. This requires flexibility and compromise. Greed is the downfall of go many players.

There are many strategic concepts used in go and most of them have analogs in commonsense maxims.

Kissinger on China and Go

For the benefit of those who do not know how to play go, I will first give a very brief description of its rules. I will then give a number of strategic principles with some diagrams illustrating what these principles are and how they are used. After that I will give some examples of how these principles correspond to decisions made by Western and Asian governments. **But just because their strategic decisions correspond to good go strategies, one should not conclude that they are strong (or even weak) go players or that they even know how to play the game. The decisions they make are based only on everyday commonsense principles that everyone uses in their daily lives.**

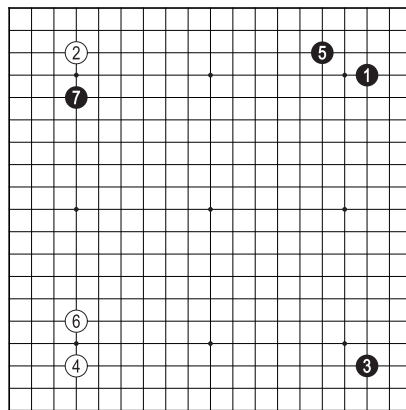
Rule 1. Go is played on a board with 19x19 horizontal and vertical lines comprising 361 intersections or points.



Rule 2. One player plays with the black stones, the other with the white ones.

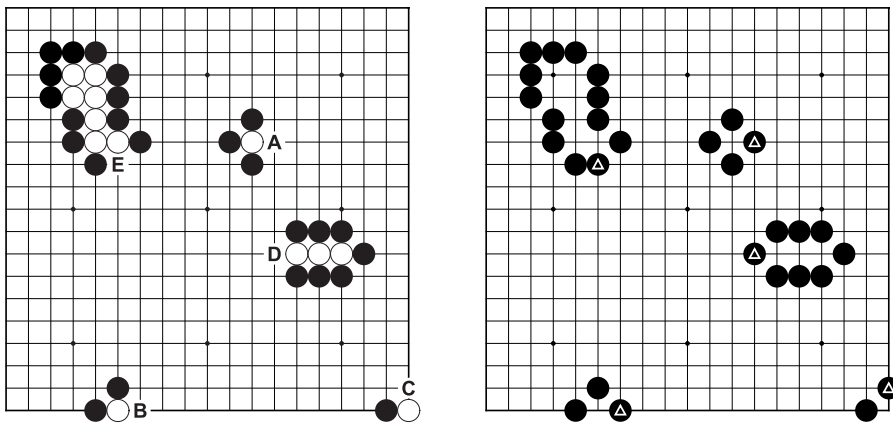
Rule 3. A move can be made on any empty intersection of the 19 vertical and 19 horizontal lines, subject to the restriction of Rule 6 below.

Rule 4. Black moves first. The players then alternate in making their moves.



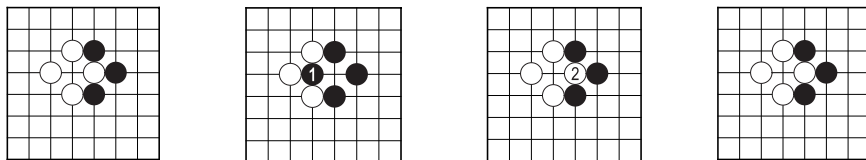
Rule 5. A stone or group of stones are captured if all the lines leading out to their adjacent intersections are occupied by the opponent.

In the diagram on the left, five different positions are shown. In each of them the white stone(s) have only one line leading out to an adjacent intersection. In each case, go players will say, “White has only one liberty.” If Black plays at A, B, or C, he will capture one stone. If Black plays at D, he will capture three stone if he plays at E, he will capture seven stones. The result of these captures after Black plays the triangled stone are shown in the diagram on the right. If White were to play on any of the points marked A to E, his stones might escape being captured.



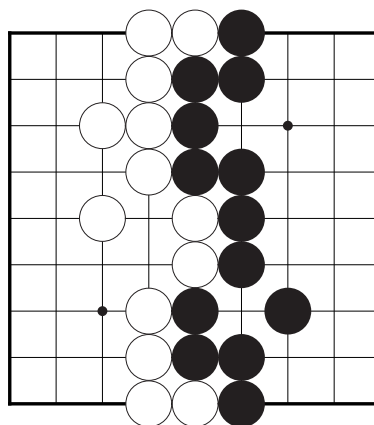
Rule 6. No move can be played that recreates a previous board position.

This rule is necessary to prevent an endless repetition of moves. Look at the position in the far left diagram. Black can capture a stone with 1 in the next diagram because it takes away the white stone’s only liberty. But according to Rule 5, White could also capture the black stone at 1 with 2 in the next diagram. But that would result in the diagram on the far right, which is identical to the diagram on the far left. If both players persist, this capturing and recapturing could go on endlessly. To prevent this, after Black plays 1, White cannot recapture but must play one move elsewhere on the board before recapturing.



Rule 7. The winner is the player who controls the more territory at the end of the game.

The diagram on the right shows the end of a game on a 9x9 board. (Go can be played on any size grid; beginners usually start learning on a 9x9 board before graduating the standard 19x19 board.) White controls all the points on the left side of the board and Black all the points on the right side. Any invasion by Black or White into the other side's sphere of influence will result in the capture of the invading stones. Count the points held by each side: Black controls 28 points and White controls 27, so Black wins by one point.



These seven rules are all you need to know to play a game of go. There are some other rules that govern how the game ends, but for this treatise, the above rules are sufficient.

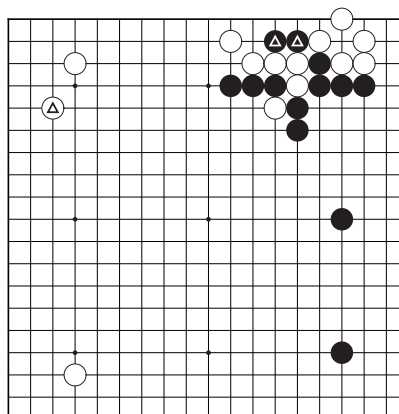
The Strategic Concepts of Go

Go has a number of important strategic concepts that all strong players are familiar with. Almost everyone of these principles has as a counterpart an adage or maxim that embodies some commonsense wisdom. Let's examine some of these concepts and see if we can find examples of them being used in the tug-of-war of nations on the world stage.

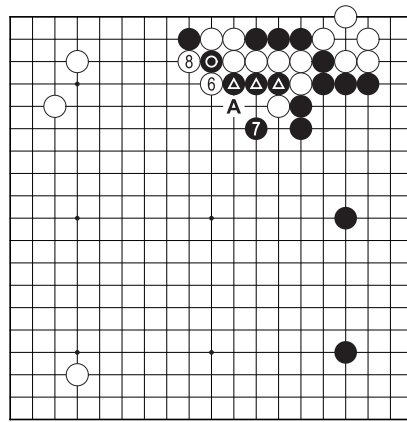
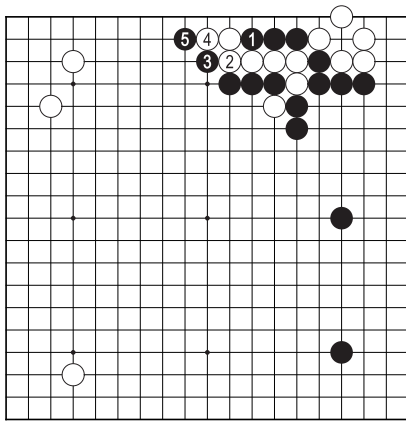
Aji is the most basic strategic concept of go. In games between strong players, it underlies every maneuver that takes place. Without an understanding of this concept, the subtle strategies of go can't be appreciated.

Aji is a Japanese word that means "taste" in the sense that "food tastes good." However, what this word really implies when used in a go context is "aftertaste". It refers to the possibilities that remain in a position after a local skirmish has been played.

In the diagram on the right, White has just played the marked stone, but the two marked black stones on the top right still have *aji*.

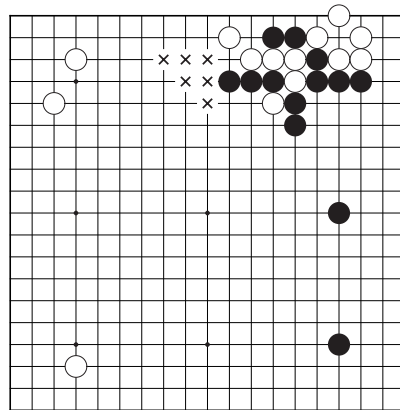


What is the *aji* of these stones? Although these stones are trapped, Black would like to rescue them by playing 1 in the diagram on the left. This move threatens to capture four white stones by playing 2. To rescue them, White must play 2. Black continues attacking them with 3 and 5. The group of seven white stones that include the stones ② and ④ and the three black stones that include the stone ① are in a race to capture each other. Black's group has three liberties and White's group has two (the points on the edge above these groups). However, Black's stones below are too thin to contain them — they have too many defects.



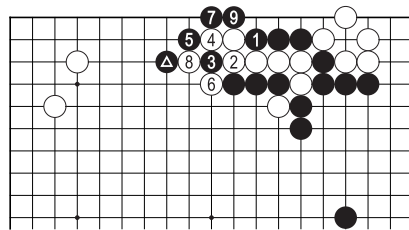
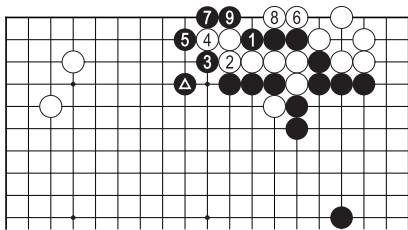
White can play 6, threatening to capture the circled stone with 8. But White 6 is also threatening to capture the three triangled stones by playing at A. The loss of the three triangled stones is too big, so Black defends them with 7. This lets White capture the circled stone with 8. Black's attack with 1 to 5 have failed.

However, if Black can somehow get to play a stone on one of the points marked with an "x" in the diagram on the right this *aji* will materialize, as the following examples illustrate.

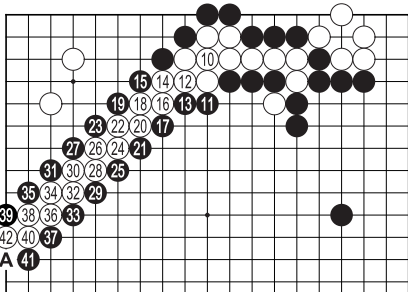


Kissinger on China and Go

Considering only the upper half of the board, if Black can somehow get to play the triangled stone in the diagram on the left as a threat to some other White stone(s) during the course of the game, Black 1 becomes an effective move. After Black 3 and 5, there are no defects in Black's position for White to exploit. White goes after the group of three black stones on the second line with 6 and 8, but Black captures seven white stones with 7 and 9. This is a huge loss for White.



If Black has a stone as far away as the marked one in the diagram on the right, Black can still utilize the aji of Black 1. White captures the stone at 3 with 6 and 8, but Black squeezes with 9.

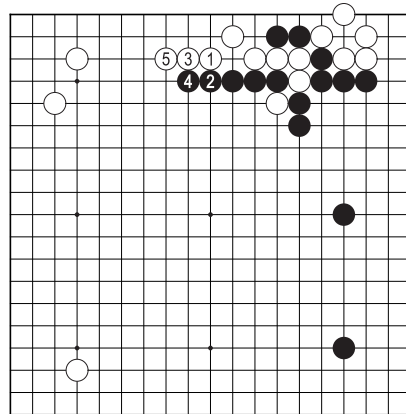
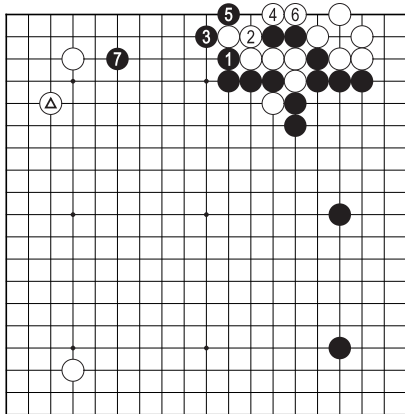


White connects with 10 in the diagram on the left. Black can now run the white stones to the edge of the left side with a series of ataris from 11 to 41. Trying to escape with 42 is futile. White has run out of liberties. Black can capture the white stones by playing at A.

This technique of capturing stones is called a ladder.

This sequence would never be played out in an actual game unless White was a beginner. As soon as the white player saw that his stones would be captured in a ladder (certainly by move 11), he would not try to escape but try to recoup his losses elsewhere on the board. Playing this sequence out to the very end would be like "throwing good money after bad," a principle that every good poker player follows.

After White plays the marked stone in the diagram on the left, Black could force White to capture the two stones by playing 1 to 5. He would then extend to 7, staking out territory on the top left. If Black omits these moves . . .



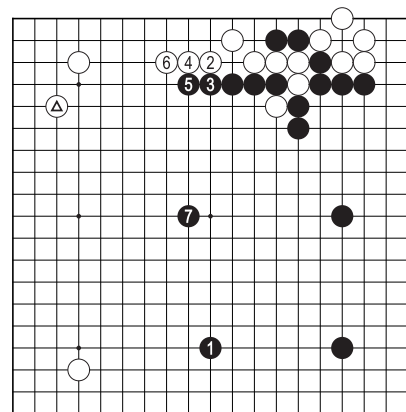
White might play 1 to 5 in the diagram on the right, securing the territory at the top. However, the wall of black stones gives Black the advantage in the center.

Even though the moves from Black 1 to 7 seem to be quite forceful and profitable, a strong player would never play them, preferring to leave open the possibilities of playing the moves in the diagrams on the preceding page.

So how would Black play after White plays the triangled stone in the diagram on page 5?

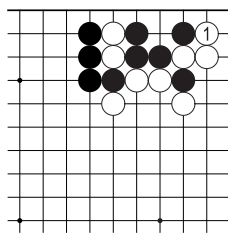
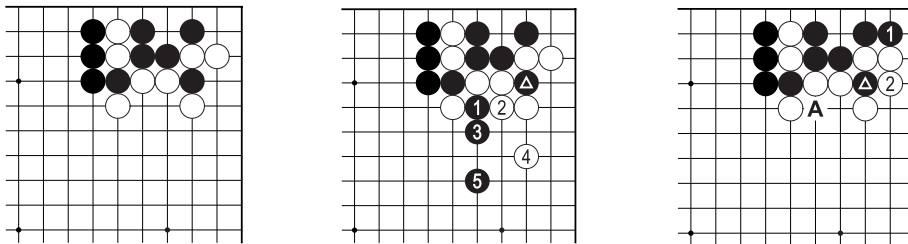
Black would probably extend to 1 in the diagram below. If White wants to eliminate his bad aji in the top right he would play 2 to 6, but Black would then map out a huge framework of potential territory on the right side with 7. Black has the advantage.

White 2 is not a good move, so Black is not worried if White plays there. He leaves the situation at the top as it is, takes a big strategic point with 1, and lets White worry about his bad aji at the top.



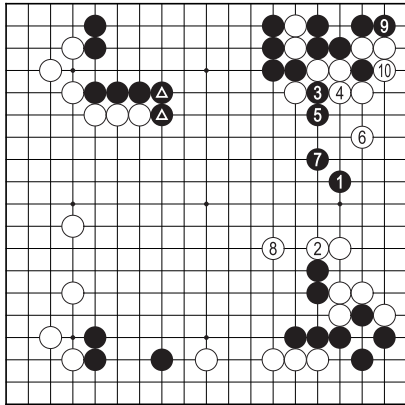
After Black 1 in the last diagram, a strong player would not play White 2. Instead, he would most likely try to establish an out post in the lower right part of the board. It is unpredictable how the game would then develop, but, if fighting spills over into the upper left quadrant of the board, Black's playing a stone on one of the key points could be a game-winning move: it could be a serious threat against another white group as well as bringing the aji that Black has at the top to life. The bottom line is that in go as well as in life, it is wise **to leave your options open for as long as possible**.

The position below in the diagram on the left arises from a standard opening sequence in the corner. The marked stone in the middle diagram leaves White with some bad aji — Black can cut with 1, threatening to capture two white stones, then play 3 and 5 next. At an early stage of the game, it is unclear whether or not these are good moves, so Black will refrain from playing them. Black 1 in the diagram on the right gains a few points of profit in the corner and forces White to capture the triangled stone with 2. If White doesn't answer, Black has a strong follow-up move at 2 that will capture two white stones. The problem is, however, that this move eliminates the threat — or the aji — of Black's playing at A.



Moreover, Black is not concerned about White playing 1 in the diagram on the left because, even though it does gain some profit, it doesn't have a follow-up move with a severe threat. Therefore, Black would ignore it and play elsewhere. This kind of move would be played in the endgame stage. However, Black 1 in the preceding diagram is a rather serious threat, so playing on this point is Black's privilege.

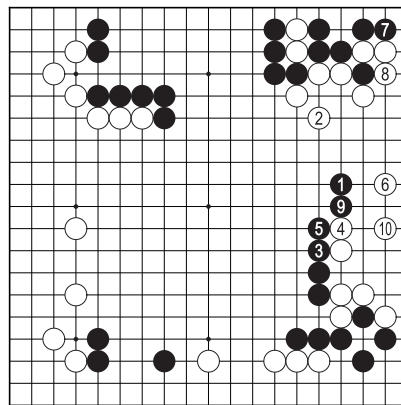
Let's see how Black exploits the aji in this position in an actual game.



In the position in the diagram on the left, note the two marked black stones. They are projecting strong influence towards the right and in the center. Influence is just as important as territory because it has the potential to become actual territory on a large scale. In the same way, **influence in the business world also has the potential to result in financial gain.**

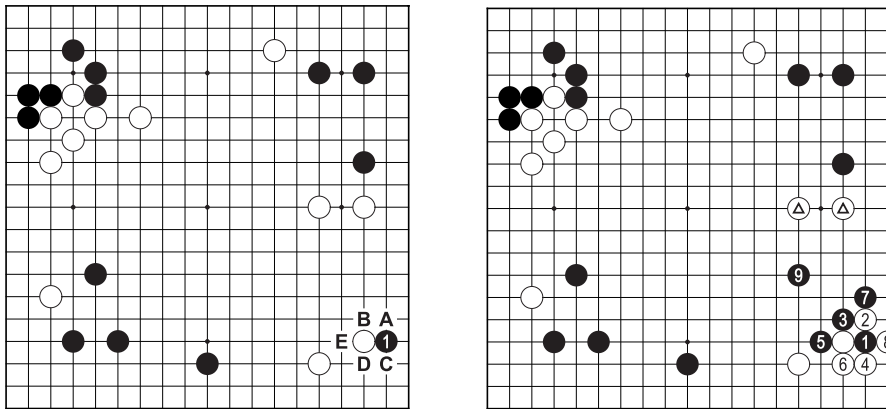
Black plays 1, attacking White's five stones on the lower right side. If White responds by defending with 2, Black exploits White's bad aji by threatening to capture two stones with the cut of 3, forcing White to defend with 4. The sequence to Black 7 can be expected. Black has built a wall on the right, projecting more influence into the center, which works well with his two marked stones on the left — Black is staking out a large framework of potential territory in the center. White's stones below are still under attack, so he jumps out into the center with 8, somewhat reducing the potential of Black's center territory. Now that Black has exploited his aji in the upper right, now is the time to take profit with 9.

Suppose White answers Black 1 by defending the defect in his position with 1 in the diagram on the right. Black might then continue his attack with the sequence to 9. With this attack, he has built up influence in the center while forcing White to take a low position on the right side. There is no longer much aji left in the upper right, so there is nothing wrong with Black's exchanging 7 for White 8. But there is no hurry; this exchange is Black's privilege.

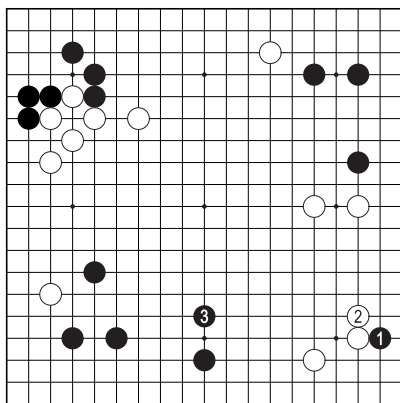


Kissinger on China and Go

In business or political negotiations, war, and even in sexual seduction, it is important to feel out how your adversaries or persons of your desires will respond; what their plans or attitudes are. In go as well, probing moves are made to determine your opponent's strategic plans.

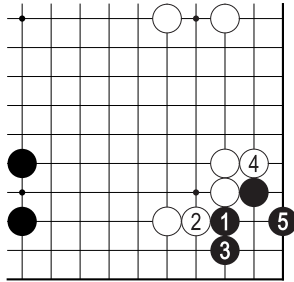


In the diagram above on the left, White's sphere of influence in the lower right part of the board is starting to get rather big. Black 1 is a standard probing move. The usual white responses might be on any of the points from A to E. Once White has committed himself to one of these moves, Black can plan an appropriate strategy. For example, if White tries to engulf the black stone at 1 with 2 in the diagram on the right, Black will cut with 3 and force White to secure the territory in the corner with 5 and 7. After White captures a stone with 8, Black jumps out into the center with 9, isolating the two marked stones between Black's position in the upper right and his stones below. The game will now be decided on how well White defends these stones and how well Black attacks them.



White might also answer Black 1 with 2 in the diagram on the left. White is reaching out to give support to his two stones above while building strength and influence facing the center. In this case, Black will respond with 3, countering White influence and building a strong framework of potential territory on the bottom left.

But what about Black's stone at 1?



This stone is like a mole, lurking behind enemy lines, waiting to be activated when the time is right. That is, it still has aji and Black can use it to make a living group in the corner with the sequence to 5 in the diagram on the left. However, playing this move at the moment is not big enough because Black has to make the last move with 5. The board is still wide open and there are many large strategic points to be taken. If Black plays as in this diagram, White will take one of those points. But as the game goes on, this stone and the threat of Black's living in the corner will be a

source of anxiety for White. He will want to eliminate this bad aji, but he must be careful how he does it and not do it prematurely. On the other hand, Black also must be careful in the timing of initiating the sequence to 5.

Planting moles in other countries is a tactic that Russia, primarily a chess-playing country, excels at. Even now, years after the cold war, it continues this tactic, as the spy scandal involving Anna Chapman and her cohorts attest to. But, of course, all countries — China, the USA, Israel, to name a few — and even business enterprises, use this tactic. It is not derived from nor is it unique to go.

Does President Barack Obama play go? He did present a go board as a gift to visiting Chinese President Hu Jintao, so he is certainly knows about go. Here is a quote from White House budget director Jacob Lew describing Obama's negotiation style:

“He looks for what the other side needs. He looks for what you need. And he looks for a solution where both can have honorable outcomes. You can't vanquish each other.”

This is the way a strong go player thinks. As I wrote on page 2, you can't control all 361 points. You must be flexible and willing to cede territory to your opponent so that you can gain more territory elsewhere. Greed is the downfall of go many players.

This is in stark contrast to the Chinese style of negotiating, where they make excessive demands and refuse to compromise. Take for example its territorial claims in the East China Sea. This area holds valuable oil and mineral deposits, so this is obviously the reason China has been aggressively making their claims.

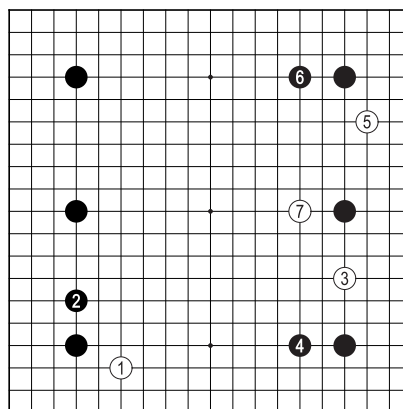
Kissinger on China and Go

Under the United Nations' Law of the Sea, a country can claim as its own Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) 200 nautical miles (370 km) from its continental shelf. However, the width of the sea between Japan and China is only 360 nautical miles, so there is an overlap. China demands that its 200-mile EEZ be recognized in spite of the overlap. The Japanese proposed as a reasonable compromise a median line as the boundary between the EEZ of China and Japan. But China refuses to make any concessions and claims an EEZ extending from the eastern end of the Chinese continental shelf which goes deep inside the Japan's EEZ. The Chinese attitude here seems to be "what's mine is mine and what's yours is mine, too."

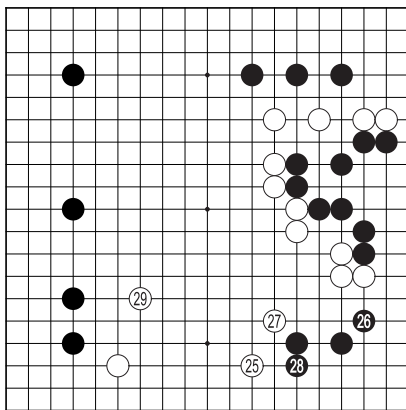
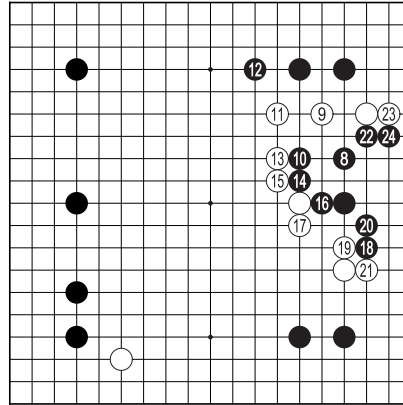
China also has a serious territorial dispute with Vietnam, as well as with the Philippines and Malaysia in the South China Sea. Again, there is no hint of compromise on the part of the Chinese.

Go has a handicap system in which the weaker player can place a certain number of stones on the board before the game begins. These stones are usually placed on the star points — the dotted intersections on the board. Handicaps are from two stones to nine. The number of handicap stones given is decided by the difference in strength of the players. Nine stones is a very big handicap, but a professional go player would have no trouble defeating a 1-dan amateur (equivalent to a first degree black belt in judo) player with this handicap. Handicaps of more than nine stones are occasionally given. However, with a 17-stone handicap, it is almost impossible for the player with White to make a living group on the board against a player with even the most rudimentary knowledge of the tactics of go.

Here is a game played with a six-stone handicap. This is a large handicap. But if Black plays passively, White can get the advantage. The first thing that White wants to do is to establish outposts in various parts of the board. In the diagram on the right, White does this with 1, 3, and 5. He then plays 7. White's stones at 3, 5 and 7 are now forming a cohesive unit, attacking the black stone in the middle of the right side.



In the diagram on the right, Black escapes with 8, but White 9 and 11 keep up the pressure. White 11 also threatens the top, so Black defends with 12. White now confines Black to the right side with the moves to 23. Finally, Black secures his stones with 24. The result of this skirmish is that Black has gained about 12 points in secure territory. It doesn't seem that White has gained any profit in this skirmish, but his wall that is projecting influence throughout the board is worth much more than the 12 points of profit that Black has gained.



In the diagram on the left, White switches to the bottom with 25, attacking the two black stones on the right. Black defends with 26 and 28 securing another 18 points of profit, but White now plays 29 and a large framework of territory, potentially worth about 50 points, suddenly appears. Black is still leading, but his initial six-stone advantage has been whittled down.

White's strategy here is similar to the one used by the United States in three of the major wars it has recently been engaged in: Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The plan of the US armed forces was to establish outposts in the country side — "pacify the local population" — then link up their forces, bringing stability to the country. Imagine the black groups on the right side and in the lower right corner as pacified villages. They are contained and no longer have much strategic influence. All White has to do now is to pacify the other black stones on the board.

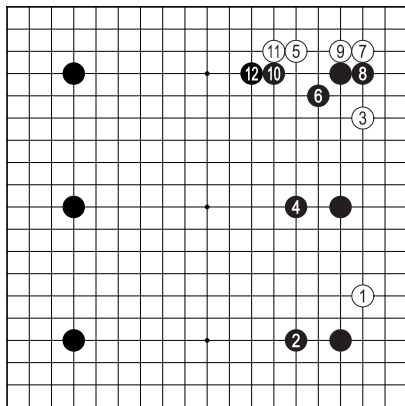
Did this strategy work in Vietnam? It failed, but perhaps the "handicap" that the United States had to fight under was too great, or perhaps the Viet Cong played a better game.

Has it worked in Iraq? It seems to have worked, but it took a long time and at great cost. Still, the situation is not completely resolved. To use a go analogy, bad aji remains.

What about Afghanistan? In my opinion, the “handicap” that the US is fighting under is too great. Not only are we fighting against the Taliban, but the officials that are supposedly on our side are corrupt and undermining our efforts as well. To continue fighting there is like **throwing good money after bad**. It’s like the position in the diagram on page 7: after Black 11, it should be clear that White cannot save his stones and he should play in another part of the board. This is essentially the same as the Powell Doctrine which could be summarized as follows: “Don’t start a war unless you can be certain of winning.”

If I were to give an assessment of the strategies of the Viet Cong and the United States based on go strategies, irrespective of whether or not it was a good decision to enter that war, I would say the US started out with a huge handicap, perhaps six stones. Contrary to submissively retreating into safe havens, as the last three diagrams above illustrated, the Viet Cong used the advantage of fighting on their home turf and forced the US military to hunker down in fortified enclaves.

The two diagrams below could be an analogy for what actually happened.



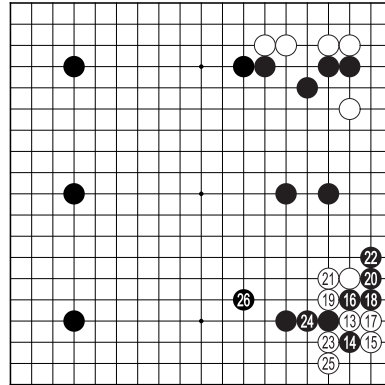
Imagine that Black is the Viet Cong, fighting on their home turf, and White is the US military trying to take control of the southern part of Vietnam. White starts by setting up outposts with 1 and 3 in the diagram on the left. White responds by moving out into the center with 4. This is a good move because it essentially keeps the two white stones from linking up — **“Divide and conquer.”**

White plays 5 to take the initiative against the black stone in the upper right —

White has the numerical advantage of two stones against one. Black again moves out into the center with 6, separating the two white stones at 3 and 5 — **“Divide and conquer.”**

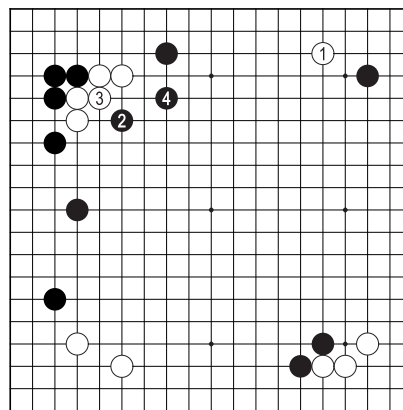
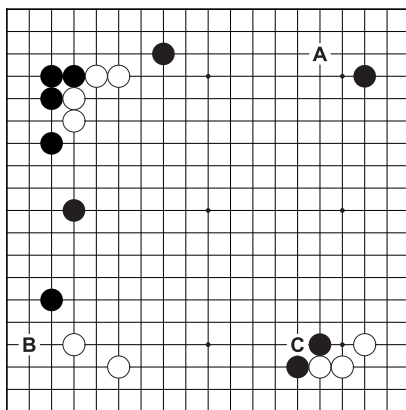
Next, White invades the corner with 7 and establishes a base for his stones. Black presses down on White’s stones with 10 and 12, keeping them confined to the top, where they have little strategic influence. Black, on the other hand, dominates the all important center, the area of the board where the game (the war) will be decided.

Next, White switches to the bottom with 13. The sequence to White 25 is a standard corner opening, but, after 26, Black has increased his dominance in the center while all White can show for his efforts are the reinforced and isolated enclaves in the upper and lower right corners. In the end, White is left with stragglers (the three stones at 1, 19, and 21, and the stone at 3), engulfed within Black's sphere of influence (stranded behind enemy lines) without much prospects for survival (they have little aji).



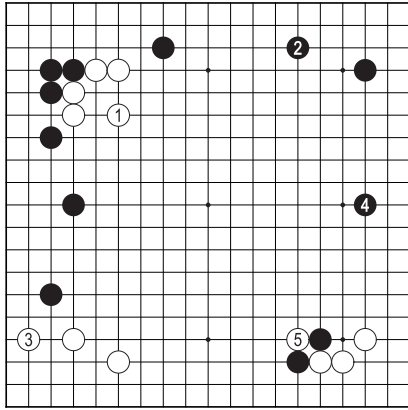
Interpreting the Vietnam war in this way, one could say that both the US and the Viet Cong are playing go. Both are playing well, but the US is under a big handicap.

There is another strategic principle in go that is similar to strategies used by invading armies. This is the principle of playing urgent moves before occupying strategic points.



In the diagram on the left, White has established an outpost in the upper left part of the board. After this there are a number of strategic points that White would like to occupy, namely A, B, and C, in order of importance.

However, if White plays on one of these points, for example at 1 in the diagram on the right, Black will attack White's stones in the upper left with 2 and 4. These stones are too big to sacrifice, but, if White tries to escape, Black will attack them and, in the process, secure territory and build influence.



Before doing anything else, it is urgent that White secure his stones with 1 in the diagram on the left. White's stones are now secure; that is, they have a living shape and are projecting influence into the center of the board. They could come under attack at a later stage in the game, but for now there is no good way to attack them, so Black occupies a strategic point with 2.

When an army invades a country, the first order of business is to establish a beachhead. This beachhead must then be secured before the army advances. This is similar to

White securing his stones with 1. White can now establish further outposts or attack without worrying about the security of his stones. With each advance another beachhead is established and a supply route for the army is gradually established. Leaving behind insecure outposts exposes the invading force to disaster.

Go has other strategic principles that can be used in making decisions, such as how to handle thick positions and settling one's stones within an opponent's sphere of influence. I refer the reader to my book *The Basics of Go Strategy* in which these principles are discussed along with numerous examples.

In conclusion, go is a game rich in strategic ideas, but it is not necessary to use it as a paradigm to make sound decisions in economics, in international relations, in war, or even in everyday life. Commonsense is usually sufficient.

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