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Fighting Without Fighting: Wu Wei and Strategic Conduct in Special Operations

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1 - U.S. Marines with Martial Arts Instructor Course 48-26 weapon grapple as part of the culminating event at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, California, Feb. 26, 2026. The MAI course is a physically and mentally demanding three-week training cycle designed to strengthen the mental and moral resiliency of Marines through tough, realistic training, enabling Marines to train their respective units. Photo by Lance Cpl. Journey Fisher

The Problem: Influencing Without Escalating the Situation

Over recent decades, Special Operations Forces (SOF) have increasingly been employed in environments marked by ambiguity, political sensitivity, and complex interactions with multiple state and non-state actors. This type of setting has become recurrent in counterterrorism operations, irregular warfare (IW), foreign internal defense, and stabilization missions, in which small operational decisions can produce disproportionate strategic effects. [1] In these contexts, success rarely depends solely on superiority of means or on the ability to impose one's will through force. [2] However, a significant portion of operational thinking remains oriented by an interventionist logic of action, where influencing is equated with directly intervening, persuading, or pressuring others to behave in a certain way.

The central problem is not necessarily the absence of operational capability, but the difficulty of modulating action in a way that is compatible with the sensitivity of the situation.

This logic tends to produce a recurring paradox. The greater the capacity to act, the greater the risk of triggering adverse reactions, latent resistance, or unwanted escalation. [3] In operations conducted in socially sensitive or politically fragile environments, it is not uncommon for actions that are technically successful in the short term to compromise broader strategic objectives by generating political, social, or psychological friction that is

difficult to reverse. The central problem, therefore, is not necessarily the absence of operational capability, but the difficulty of modulating action in a way that is compatible with the sensitivity of the situation.

Western literature on strategy and special operations acknowledges this dilemma in various debates on influence, legitimacy, and the management of escalation. In general, it tends to address this dilemma through incremental solutions: adjustments to the level of force employed, refinement of strategic communication, or the development of new influence tools. The underlying logic remains relatively stable: act better, act with greater precision, or act at what is deemed the right moment. What is rarely questioned, however, is the very premise that influence necessarily results from deliberate action exerted upon others.

It is precisely here that a relevant conceptual gap emerges. In complex environments, influencing does not merely mean intervening but also understanding the dynamics of the situation and aligning oneself with them. The inability to distinguish between effective action and excessive action tends to generate automatic responses based on previous patterns, even when the context calls for a different kind of conduct. In such cases, escalation may occur not because of the adversary's hostility, but as a consequence of the initial response's inadequacy.

Historical experience offers many examples of tactically successful actions that ultimately produced unexpected strategic consequences. One frequently cited case occurred in Mogadishu in 1993 when U.S. SOF were employed to capture members of a militia linked to Somali leader Mohamed Farrah Aidid. What was initially conceived as a limited tactical action ended up turning into a major urban confrontation with broad political and media repercussions. As Alessandro Visacro observes, this dynamic enabled the Somali leader to amplify the psychological and informational effects of the episode and turned a localized battle into a political victory that contributed to the withdrawal of U.S. and United Nations forces from Somalia. [4]

Therefore, the central question is: How can SOF influence complex environments without triggering mechanisms of resistance or unnecessary escalation? To explore this question, a conceptual shift is proposed. Rather than understanding influence solely as imposition, persuasion, or control, this text examines the possibility of conceiving it as a form of strategic attunement to the dynamics of the situation. The approach adopted here is inspired by classical Chinese strategic thought, particularly the notion of *wu wei*, often translated as "non-action." *Wu wei* refers to the ability to act without forcing the course of events, allowing the unfolding of circumstances to contribute to the desired outcome.

In contexts in which acting too much can be as harmful as acting too little, the ability to perceive when not to act, or when to act indirectly, may become a relevant strategic differentiator.

This strategic mode of thought exerted profound influence on the Chinese intellectual tradition, serving as a foundation for works such as *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu. It is important to note that the notion of wu wei historically predates the emergence of the Chinese martial system *Ving Tsun* by many centuries. In referencing this system, it is not intended to suggest that wu wei is the origin of Ving Tsun. Rather, the embodied experience present in this practice offers a useful way to explore some of the strategic principles associated with wu wei, especially those related to perceiving the emerging dynamics of a situation.

The reflection developed is grounded in empirical experience accumulated over more than two decades of work as a guest instructor with special operations units in Brazil, including elite military and police forces. [5] These experiences are discussed without any sensitive operational detail, serving only as a basis for observing recurring patterns of interaction, decision, and response in environments of high uncertainty. By integrating these elements, the aim is not to propose a new doctrine or set of procedures to be applied but rather to offer a strategic framework capable of expanding operators' sensitivity in reading a situation. In contexts in which acting too much can be as harmful as acting too little, the ability to perceive when not to act, or when to act indirectly, may become a relevant strategic differentiator. [6]

The Gap in Contemporary SOF Thinking

Despite its recognized adaptive capacity, contemporary special operations thinking still carries a significant legacy from the Western strategic tradition characterized by the centrality of deliberate action. Planning, deciding, and executing continue to be understood as fundamental pillars of operational effectiveness. [7] Even when the complexity of the environment is acknowledged, the predominant response is still to improve these same pillars by adding layers of technical sophistication, intelligence, and interagency coordination.

In recent years, this issue has also been discussed within the SOF community itself. In his monograph, Col. Edward Croot argues that part of contemporary special operations culture has gradually come to privilege direct action capabilities at the expense of indirect approaches that are historically associated with these units. [8³] His work sparked a significant debate among practitioners and scholars in the field. Authors like David Shell, [9⁴] Greg Banner, [10⁵] and Mark Grdovic [11⁶] critically examined this thesis from different perspectives, discussing everything from the alleged "identity crisis" of the U.S. Army Special Forces to the structural transformations that have taken place in the broader SOF ecosystem over recent decades. Although interpretations vary, the debate reveals a shared concern: In certain operational contexts, the centrality of immediate action may obscure other forms of

³<https://www.jsou.edu/Press/PublicationDashboard/255>

⁴<https://www.jsou.edu/Press/PublicationDashboard/276>

⁵<https://www.jsou.edu/Press/PublicationDashboard/301>

⁶<https://smallwarsjournal.com/2025/11/24/special-forces-identify-crisis-deja-vu-all-over-again/>

strategic influence. This debate offers a relevant starting point for reflecting on alternative approaches to reading and conducting operational situations.

This movement has produced important advances, but it also establishes a structural limit. By maintaining action as the organizing axis of strategic thought, it tends to reduce the attention devoted to the prior reading of the situation and to the existing dynamics before any intervention takes place. In other words, it is often assumed that the situation is a problem to be solved, rather than a dynamic field whose potential can be understood and exploited. Within the world of SOF, this logic manifests itself in various ways. In influence operations, for example, success tends to be associated with the ability to shape perceptions, alter behaviors, or induce favorable decisions. Although these objectives are legitimate, an excessive emphasis on inducement can generate relevant side effects. The more evident the attempt to influence becomes, the greater the likelihood of triggering mechanisms of resistance, even among actors who were initially neutral or cooperative. There is, therefore, a tension that remains underexplored between strategic intention and actual effect. In socially dense, culturally sensitive, or politically fragmented environments, the intention to influence may be perceived as interference, threat, or manipulation. The consequence is not merely the loss of immediate effectiveness, but the creation of a field of friction that extends over time, making future actions more difficult and increasing the strategic cost of each intervention.

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Another critical aspect of this conceptual gap concerns the tempo of action. The Western strategic tradition tends to value constant initiative, often understood as a sign of moral, technical, or strategic superiority. “Maintaining the initiative” becomes almost an imperative, even when the environment suggests caution, waiting, or prolonged observation. In such cases, acting becomes less a response to the situation and more an institutional reaffirmation of force itself. This posture encounters clear limits in operations in which excess presence, visibility, or assertiveness may be interpreted as escalation. In such contexts, a poorly calibrated initiative not only fails to produce the desired effects but may accelerate adverse processes that were previously latent. In these cases, escalation is often triggered by an inadequate reading of the propensity of the situation.

The gap identified here does not lie in the absence of tools, training, or operators’ cognitive capability. On the contrary, SOF are widely recognized for their flexibility, autonomy, and readiness to deal with the unexpected. The challenge lies in the conceptual framework that guides the interpretation of the situation and, consequently, the choice of conduct. If the

focus remains predominantly on the question “What should we do?”, the opportunity is lost to explore a prior and often more decisive question: “What is the situation already doing?” This inversion shifts attention from action to relationship, intervention to attunement, and control to a more sensitive reading of context.

It is in this space that the possibility of a productive dialogue with classical Chinese strategic wisdom emerges. Rather than proposing merely one more layer of methods or procedures, this tradition invites us to rethink the very foundation of strategic effectiveness. The notion of wu wei then emerges as an analytical tool capable of illuminating underexplored areas of contemporary operational thought. The next step is to clarify this concept with precision, avoiding simplistic translations or superficial appropriations. Before any practical implication, it is necessary to understand what wu wei effectively means in the context of strategic action.

Key Concepts

Strategic Origins of Classical Chinese Thought

Contrary to the dominant perception that contemporary conflicts are products of a supposedly “modern world,” several strategic analysts have emphasized the structural continuity between antiquity and today’s security dilemmas. In *Warrior Politics*, the American geopolitical analyst Robert D. Kaplan argues that there is no real rupture between the distant past and the present. [12] His claim is straightforward: the more carefully one examines antiquity, the more clearly one understands the challenges of the contemporary world. Not surprisingly, the book was described by Henry Kissinger as “one of the most profound books” he had read at the time.

This premise is particularly relevant for understanding classical Chinese strategic thought. The notions explored in this article did not emerge from a context of institutional stability or abstract ethical reflection but were consolidated during the Warring States period (approx. 475–221 BCE). [13] This period was marked by political fragmentation, continuous conflict, volatile alliances, and the absence of a central authority capable of imposing lasting order. It was a historical environment characterized by strategic ambiguity, prolonged competition, and constant risks of escalation.

Classical Chinese strategic thought seeks to govern its dynamics, reducing unnecessary friction while preserving room for maneuver over time.

In such a scenario, the survival of states did not depend solely on material superiority or the direct imposition of force. It depended primarily on the ability to read the situation, preserve functional relationships, and exploit latent resources without provoking

unnecessary resistance. It is under these conditions that concepts such as *wu wei*, *Jan*, *Noi Lik*, and what this text will refer to as “soft conduct” (*Chi Jit*) took shape. These notions were not conceived as universal moral values, but as strategic instruments aimed at effectiveness in environments where coercive action tended to generate disproportionate costs.

The reference to the Warring States period highlights that classical Chinese strategic thought emerged from a context structurally similar to what is now described as hybrid environments, gray zones, or IW scenarios. [14] Just as Kaplan turns to antiquity to understand contemporary politics, referring to this period of Chinese history is not an exercise in erudition but a way of accessing a strategic repertoire forged under conditions of uncertainty, continuous competition, and high-relational sensitivity.

This origin helps explain why such concepts emphasize attunement to the situation, the reading of propensity, and the careful use of available resources, rather than the search for rapid solutions or constant demonstrations of force. [15] Far from denying conflict, classical Chinese strategic thought seeks to govern its dynamics, reducing unnecessary friction while preserving room for maneuver over time.

Human Development and Jan as a Strategic Condition

In classical Chinese strategic thought, human development does not appear as an ethical addendum to action, nor as a moral refinement following decision-making. It constitutes a prior strategic condition without which the reading of the situation tends to become imprecise, and action may oscillate between excess and insufficiency. It is in this sense that Jan—often translated as humanity—should be understood. In this article, Jan is not treated as a moral value, religious principle, or humanitarian imperative. It is a strategic device for preserving relationships that is essential for maintaining access to the informational field of the situation. By recognizing the other not as an ontological enemy but as someone occupying another position within the same relational field, the operator preserves the continuity necessary to perceive intentions, rhythms, tensions, and possibilities for action.

When the opponent is reduced exclusively to the category of enemy, perceptual impoverishment occurs. Dehumanization tends to rupture the relationship and, with it, access to resources available within the situation itself. These resources may be social, symbolic, emotional, or relational in nature. In certain circumstances, they may also include the opponent’s own disposition, initiative, or strength—provided these elements are understood as part of the same situational field. The Chinese perspective can be understood as transindividual. The situation does not belong to one side alone but emerges from the interaction among all involved actors. In this sense, the other is not merely an obstacle to be overcome but a constitutive element of the field that conditions one’s own possibilities for action.

Jan is not treated as a moral value, religious principle, or humanitarian imperative. It is a strategic device for preserving relationships that is essential for maintaining access to the informational field of the situation.

From a strategic standpoint, this understanding expands the repertoire of decision-making. Preserving Jan does not mean avoiding conflict or abandoning firm action when necessary. It means not prematurely breaking the relationship upon which the reading of situational propensity and access to available resources depend. Thus, human development in the perspective adopted here refers to the capacity to maintain perceptual clarity under tension, sustain the relationship even in the face of opposition, and prevent emotions—such as fear, anger, or urgency—from narrowing the field of decision. Jan therefore functions as the foundation upon which both restraint and decisive action can occur in accordance with what the situation requires.

Wu Wei as Action in the Pre-Event

In classical Chinese strategic thought, wu wei does not refer to the absence of action nor to permanent restraint in the face of conflict. Its core lies in acting in the **pre-event**, or continuously working on the conditions of the situation before an event becomes visible, irreversible, or spectacular. Strategic effectiveness, from this perspective, is not measured by the direct achievement of an objective but by the capacity to configure the field of possibilities so that certain effects emerge almost spontaneously.

This logic shifts the focus of strategy from the desired outcome to the tendencies in formation. Instead of reacting to crises that have already manifested, wu wei directs attention to early—often subtle—signals that indicate the probable direction of future developments. A crisis, therefore, does not begin when a building collapses or when a fire spreads. It begins much earlier, in the embryonic stage of the situation, when legitimate room still exists to guide its course. At this stage, it becomes possible to act upon rhythms, expectations, dispositions, and latent alignments, preventing the situation from crystallizing into forms that later require harsher responses.

Acting through wu wei does not imply manipulating people, applying psychological persuasion, or imposing external will. Rather, it involves acting upon the situation itself in the strictly strategic sense of the term. The attentive operator identifies the potential already present in the field and works to favor what is naturally inclined to unfold, while avoiding reinforcement of adverse vectors.

Noi Lik and the Less Apparent Resources of the Situation

In classical Chinese strategic thought, reading the situation is not limited to visible, measurable, or immediately actionable elements. A significant portion of strategic potential lies in factors that do not present themselves explicitly but nevertheless condition possible

developments. This is where the notion of Noi Lik appears, understood here as a **less apparent resource of the situation**.

Unlike capabilities introduced externally, Noi Lik refers to resources that already exist within the situational field, even if they are not clearly organized or recognized as such. These resources may take multiple forms: latent dispositions, internal tensions, social expectations, local rhythms, tacit alignments, or structural fragilities. To explore Noi Lik does not mean creating artificial advantages but recognizing and using what the situation itself offers. Strategic action consists of favoring certain vectors already present while avoiding reinforcement of others that could lead to undesirable outcomes.

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It is important to distinguish this notion from what military vocabulary often calls “field expedients,” which refer to improvising substitute resources when planned means are unavailable. Field expedients usually emerge as responses to limitations or unforeseen developments already manifested during the event, and represent reactive adaptation carried out under pressure and with limited ability to shape the situation’s evolution. Noi Lik, in contrast, refers to the recognition of potentials already present within the situation itself, even if they are not immediately organized or perceived as resources. It relates to adaptation that occurs **before** the crystallization of the event, arising from an anticipatory reading of emerging tendencies. While field expedients compensate for material absence and respond to constraints already in place, Noi Lik operates at the level of strategic anticipation.

[Soft Conduct, Process Perspective, and Martial Experience](#)

Understanding Chi Jit presupposes a **processual perspective of the situation**. In classical Chinese strategic thought, the situation is not understood as an isolated event but as a continuous process in permanent transformation.

Within this logic, every situation can be observed through three interdependent moments.

- Pre-event
- Event
- Post-event

The **event** corresponds only to the visible manifestation of tendencies already in formation. The **post-event** consists of the unfolding consequences of action, including the interpretation of outcomes and the reconfiguration of the situation that will shape subsequent decisions. The post-event, in turn, simultaneously becomes the **pre-event** of a

new cycle. It is within this flow that Chi Jit, or soft conduct, finds its strategic meaning. It regulates variations in conduct throughout the process, allowing adjustments in intensity, form, and rhythm of action according to the stage of the situation.

The study of this logic is not exhausted by conceptual formulations. One of the privileged pathways for its learning lies in **martial experience**, understood here not as sport practice or physical confrontation in a narrow sense, but as the study of traditional martial arts as systems of strategic intelligence. In these pedagogical contexts, bodily situations of interaction and opposition are structured in progressively unpredictable ways, allowing observation of emotional, cognitive, and decision-making responses under controlled pressure. This approach exposes practitioners to real stimuli without the risks of an actual threat to life. In doing so, it preserves the necessary space for observation, reflection, and adjustment of conduct. Thus, martial experience may function as a privileged laboratory for human and strategic development. It allows the concrete study of action in the pre-event, the processual reading of the situation, and the variation of conduct across continuous cycles. In complex environments where decisions rarely resolve themselves in a single moment and where each action feeds subsequent cycles, this form of learning becomes particularly relevant. It prepares individuals not merely to react to critical events, but to accompany and guide processes over time.

Martial Experience as an Empirical Laboratory for High-Uncertainty Environments

The concepts presented in the previous sections do not emerge solely from theoretical formulations. They were progressively understood through the observation of how individuals perceive, decide, and adjust their conduct when exposed to unpredictability, pressure, and the need for real-time action. In this sense, martial experience may be understood as a particularly useful empirical laboratory for studying these phenomena. It is important to clarify that the use of martial experience in this context is not the same as teaching combatants defensive tactics or self-defense (the transmission of physical confrontation techniques). The study of such approaches is valid and plays an important role in operational preparation; however, limiting the potential of martial arts to that domain means restricting a significant part of their formative value. The interest of this article lies with the possibility of understanding certain martial traditions as strategic learning environments capable of contributing to the refinement of situational perception and adaptation under pressure. [16] In a broader sense, therefore, fighting is not an end. Martial experience may serve as a means of stimulating the development or refinement of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects relevant to performance in complex contexts.

From this perspective, martial experience functions less as a system of techniques and more as a means of experiential learning in which the body itself acts as a medium of knowledge.

Bodily situations of symbolic combat, structured in progressively unpredictable ways and compatible with the individual's capacity to respond, are conducted in a safe environment and do not require prior knowledge of martial arts. Under these conditions, it becomes possible to observe directly how emotional reactions, hasty decisions, hesitations, or attempts at excessive control arise under pressure. These phenomena, which are often difficult to identify in real operational contexts because of the urgency of the event, become more visible when reproduced in a controlled symbolic environment.

This dynamic creates a fertile field for observing how such reactions influence processes of anticipation, perception, decision, and conduct. It also makes it possible to perceive how the individual mobilizes adaptive resources under pressure. In classical Chinese strategic thought, widely explored by authors such as François Jullien, effectiveness is often associated with the ability to follow the transformation of the situation and adjust conduct continuously. By contrast, approaches more strongly oriented by previously defined models tend to value capacities such as resistance or resilience to sustain an established plan. These capacities are not, of course, useless. In many operational contexts, they are indispensable. However, within an adaptive logic, resistance and resilience may be understood as situational resources mobilized when the situation so requires, rather than as the organizing principle of action.

The pedagogical value of this environment lies precisely in the fact that it allows such reactions to manifest without physical survival being the absolute priority, as it would be in a real confrontation. In real combat, attention tends to be monopolized by the immediate need to survive. In symbolic situations, by contrast, it becomes possible to observe one's own response patterns and progressively adjust them over time. In this sense, martial experience does not directly teach what to do in an operational situation or add new competencies to the operator's repertoire. Its role is closer to adjusting the degree of a lens. Just as a surgeon remains responsible for performing the operation but depends on proper lenses to see the operative field with precision, the operator remains responsible for applying his technical and doctrinal knowledge to mobilize, at the appropriate moment, technical and behavioral competencies that already form part of his repertoire. Martial experience may help refine the way he perceives the situation, reducing what might be described as a kind of situational myopia.

This type of experience constitutes a form of learning that goes beyond mere intellectual understanding. The central point is to create an environment favorable for the individual to observe his own reactions and learn from them. In this process, knowledge is not simply taught directly; it tends to be progressively learned as the practitioner interacts with the situation and perceives the consequences of his choices. As Jullien observes in his analysis, effectiveness does not result from the application of a previously conceived ideal model, but from taking advantage of the potential already present in the situation.

Implications for Special Operations Environments

In special operations environments, effectiveness rarely depends exclusively on a perfectly executed plan. It is often associated with the ability to read the situation in motion, identify emerging tendencies, and adjust conduct before certain events consolidate themselves. In other words, planning does not function as a rigid model to be followed, but as a reference for conduct that guides action in the face of transformations in the situation.

Action in the pre-event, previously discussed with the concept of wu wei, becomes particularly relevant in this context. In many sensitive operations, the most important decisions occur before the main event clearly manifests. Small changes in behavior, variations in the social environment, or subtle shifts in the rhythm of the situation may indicate tendencies in formation. The ability to recognize these initial signs significantly broadens the repertoire of available options. When this reading does not occur, intervention tends to take place only when the situation has become explicit, making the available options more limited and often involve greater visibility, greater friction, and a greater likelihood of escalation. The principles discussed in this article do not propose an alternative doctrine but rather offer a complementary perspective for understanding the dynamics of decision-making in complex environments. Attention shifts from the search for immediate responses to the observation of emerging tendencies and to the strategic use of the potential already present in the situation itself.

Decision-Making Under Pressure and the Management of Attention

One of the most recurrent effects of pressure in operational environments is the compression of attention. Under conditions of risk, urgency, and unpredictability, the perceptual field tends to narrow rapidly. Attention becomes concentrated on a single stimulus that is typically considered threatening or decisive, while other relevant elements of the environment cease to be perceived. This phenomenon does not necessarily result from a lack of information or technical preparation. It often results from the way the cognitive system reacts to pressure and uncertainty. Rapid decisions may be made but often based on a partial reading of the situation. [17]

Martial experience exposes the individual to bodily situations of controlled and progressive unpredictability and makes it possible to observe this perceptual narrowing clearly. As symbolic pressure increases, recurring patterns, like hasty actions, attempts at excessive control, or decision paralysis, become visible. By recognizing these patterns throughout the experience, the individual gradually develops a more flexible form of attention that is capable of expanding or contracting as the situation requires. Instead of reacting automatically to the most intense stimulus, the individual learns to sustain observation of the situation for a few moments and allow its propensity to reveal itself more clearly. This is a type of vigilant attention, yet one devoid of rigidity or excessive tension. This small interval of observation, which occurs in the pre-configuration phase of an event and often goes externally unnoticed, may have a significant impact on the quality of the decision. In special

operations environments where each decision feeds subsequent cycles of action and reaction, the ability to preserve this perceptual openness becomes an important strategic resource. [18]

Adaptive Leadership and the Strategic Use of Situational Resources

Effective leadership is rarely sustained by the rigid application of a pre-established model. Just as there is no single bodily posture appropriate for all situations in traditional martial arts, there is also no universally applicable style of leadership. [19] Leadership becomes an adaptive practice. At certain moments, the situation demands clear direction and assertiveness. At others, it demands restraint, listening, and the ability to allow the team to mobilize its own competencies.

Just as there is no single bodily posture appropriate for all situations in traditional martial arts, there is also no universally applicable style of leadership.

At this point, the notion of Noi Lik becomes particularly relevant. To lead does not merely mean employing formal resources of authority but also recognizing and mobilizing resources already present in the situation itself. Among these resources are often the experience, expertise, and situational perception of the team members themselves. This approach does not imply abdication of command or transfer of responsibility. On the contrary, it requires decisional maturity. The leader remains responsible for the final decision but recognizes that the quality of that decision may be enhanced when different situational perspectives are considered.

Brazilian Operational Context and the Empirical Density of Experience

The observations discussed in this article were developed and refined in an operational environment marked by high levels of social complexity, institutional ambiguity, and persistent violence. The Brazilian context presents characteristics that often require constant situational reading, continuous adaptation, and decisions under strong emotional pressure. In this scenario, the distinction between pre-event, event, and post-event becomes particularly relevant. Many crisis situations do not arise abruptly but evolve gradually from subtle signs. The ability to recognize these signs may decisively influence the way the process unfolds. Part of these reflections was recorded in an official doctrinal journal of the Brazilian Army, not as a description of operational procedures, but as a conceptual analysis of human development, adaptation, and decision-making under pressure.

Although these observations emerged from this specific context, similar challenges have been described in different contemporary operational environments, including recent debates in the field of SOF. In this sense, the Brazilian experience presented here does not intend to offer an exportable model, but to contribute as an empirical field from which certain principles may be observed clearly.

When martial experience is used as a symbolic learning device, it has been proven to be useful in this environment. Allowing fundamental human reactions to be observed under safe conditions made it possible to study patterns of attention, decision, and conduct that also manifest themselves in real operational contexts. Evidently, martial experience does not constitute a universal solution or replace other forms of professional preparation. Its value lies in contributing to the development of certain perceptual and adaptive capacities that may complement the operators' existing repertoire. Thus, the Brazilian context functions in this article not as an isolated illustration, but as an empirical field that concretely highlights the importance of integrating situational reading, continuous adaptation, and leadership adjusted to the dynamics of the situation.

Conclusion

Special operations environments are characterized by high levels of uncertainty, time pressure, and situational complexity. Under such conditions, effectiveness rarely depends only on the availability of information or on the existence of well-defined procedures. Often, the decisive factor lies in the ability to clearly perceive the dynamics of the situation in progress and to adjust conduct before certain events consolidate themselves.

The concepts discussed in this article suggest that classical Chinese strategic thought offers a useful perspective for reflecting on this challenge. By emphasizing adaptation, situational reading, and the exploitation of the potential already present in the circumstance itself, this strategic tradition shifts attention away from the rigid application of previously conceived models toward the observation of tendencies in formation. In this context, notions such as *wu wei* and *Noi Lik* help us understand effectiveness not as the result of directly imposing a plan upon reality, but as the consequence of the ability to recognize and explore the propensity of the situation.

Martial experience was presented as a possible resource for observing and developing these capacities. By creating symbolic situations of pressure and unpredictability in a safe environment, it becomes possible to observe how emotional reactions, hasty decisions, hesitations, or attempts at excessive control arise in the face of uncertainty. These reactions, often difficult to identify in real operational contexts because of the urgency of the event, become more visible when reproduced in controlled learning environments. Evidently, martial experience is not a universal solution, nor is it intended to replace other forms of professional preparation. Its value lies in contributing to the development of certain perceptual and adaptive capacities that may complement the existing repertoire of operators and leaders. By favoring a clearer observation of situational dynamics, this type of experience may help individuals and teams mobilize technical and behavioral competencies that are already part of their formation more appropriately.

For leaders and operators working in highly complex environments, this suggests that part of the preparation for such contexts may involve not only the improvement of tactics, techniques, and procedures, but also the development of perceptual capacities that make it possible to perceive, interpret, and anticipate situational transformations in real time. Small shifts in the perception of the situation, often imperceptible externally, may significantly influence the quality of decisions, especially in contexts in which each action feeds subsequent cycles of adaptation and reaction. In this sense, the central argument is that the broader study of martial arts—not merely learning to fight—may function as a learning environment in which processes of perception, adaptation, and decision-making under pressure become observable and exploitable. By bringing these experiences closer to strategic reflection, the repertoire of available perspectives for understanding and dealing with complex operational environments is expanded.

Martial experience is not a universal solution, nor is it intended to replace other forms of professional preparation. By favoring a clearer observation of situational dynamics, this type of experience may help individuals and teams mobilize technical and behavioral competencies that are already part of their formation more appropriately.

This perspective helps explain why certain martial traditions have historically been associated not only with physical combat, but also with the development of forms of perception and strategic conduct. In this regard, an observation attributed to Patriarch Moy Yat (1938–2001), an important representative of the Ving Tsun tradition, expressively synthesizes the argument discussed here: “the Ving Tsun system is so good that it is even useful for fighting.” [20] The phrase, though apparently paradoxical, points to a central idea: the deepest value of certain martial traditions lies not only in physical confrontation, but in the way they structure perception, decision, and conduct in the face of uncertain and constantly changing situations.

About the Author

Fabio Gomes was introduced to Chinese martial culture through the Ving Tsun system, in which he received the title of Senior Master from the International MYVT Federation (New York), under the guidance of Grandmaster Leo Imamura. He currently serves as a member of the Leadership Committee of the MYVT Safeguard Group. With nearly 30 years of experience, he has built a career that led him to serve as a guest instructor for defense and security organizations in Brazil. Among his contributions are instructional activities conducted for the Brazilian Army Commandos and Special Forces, the Brazilian Navy Amphibious Commandos, and police officers from BOPE/RJ (Special Police Operations Battalion of Rio de Janeiro), as well as collaboration in the preparation of military personnel

for United Nations Peacekeeping Missions. He is the author of the book *The Art of Fighting Without Fighting: The Chinese Martial System Ving Tsun in the Special Operations of the Brazilian Army* and of articles published in international magazines and specialized journals, including the Brazilian Army's Military Doctrine Journal and the Journal of the International Law Enforcement Educators and Trainers Association. Based on this experience, his work also extends into the corporate sector, assisting leaders and teams in risk management, situational perception, and decision-making under pressure.

Notes

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2. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton University Press, 1976).
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