The art of war recognizes nine varieties of ground: dispersive ground; facile ground; contentious ground; open ground; ground of intersecting highways; serious ground; difficult ground; hemmed in ground; desperate ground.

The globalization of the marketplace has become a common feature of today’s business world. It is no longer novel, but accepted as the future battleground of all ventures, not the least of which is the major project arena. Thus, in developing any project strategy, these external influences and drivers must be assessed and taken into account.

Even those opportunities in one’s established markets have become greatly influenced by the implications of global accessibility. This is certainly true for the major development project, since even established customers and suppliers will expect to compete with, or combine, offerings from low-cost providers around the world.

In the majority of industries the emphasis for future business opportunities is outward-looking to the developing world. Communications has expanded now to such an extent that no real hindrance or advantage can be exploited by distance.

Investment strategy is now centred primarily on the economic drivers of low-cost manufacture, labour and resources. The environmental pressures and demands of established industrial markets have moved the focus to those regions where greater flexibility can be enjoyed.

Developing project strategies for this disillusioned landscape requires a careful analysis of its pressures. For while the expectation will be there to benefit from all the global market has to offer, there will be still the presumption that traditional relationships and performance will prevail. These contradictory aspirations lead to conflict and a breakdown of past affiliations. This can be seen in many industries, at every level. The world
of projects is no different, and is perhaps in some respects even more vulnerable.

When a chieftain is fighting in his own territory, it is dispersive ground. When he has penetrated into hostile territory, but to no great distance, it is facile ground.

The temptation therefore is to venture into new territories and exploit the expertise that has been created in the past. Many have gone in search of the valuable prizes that have been identified, and failed because they did not commit themselves to understand the nature of the marketplace they faced.

To build a new capability outside one’s comfort zone is not an approach that can be taken lightly. There is a need for positive investment to understand the rules of engagement. A cursory analysis of the potential benefits may soon be challenged when tested against an approach that has not been tested in that environment. Many major projects have failed based on the assumption that what worked at home will work anywhere.

The exploitation of low-cost labour and resources is quickly tested when it is realized that the infrastructure and skills base is not what had been imagined. The strategy that assumes that a single model of organization can be transported to distant parts without adjustment is certain to come under tremendous pressure. Even worse is the perspective that such exploratory ventures can be executed from the home base.

Many have learned this lesson the hard way, and others will perish as they ignore the fate of those who have gone before and push forward, disregarding the business landscape and approach they will meet.

The project world has seen many such expeditions fail, and projects which should have been the cornerstone of future investment becoming millstones for those involved.

Moving the complex project environment into new territory must be done with consideration and strategies that recognize the full extent of the challenge being faced.

Ground the possession of which imports great advantage to either side, is contentious ground.

The most significant factor in all new global business activities is the