How to defend in critical situations? 2 april 2018

Defending in Shogi is one of the most difficult things there is. Especially with little time on the clock and an opponent with some pieces in hand. In my latest tournament in The Hague I was in 2 games unable to defend correctly.
In this article we will look at 3 important techniques for defending in critical situations. Do you join me in learning from my mistakes?

Speed awareness
Before looking at the defensive techiques, in Shogi it is very important to have speed awareness. If you can mate quicker than your opponent, then it is wise just to continue with your own attack, as a defensive move does not guarantee slowing your opponent's attack down with at least one move.
If you don't have a direct mate, you need to verify whether the opponent has a threatmate, and what the threat is. Understanding what the opponent is threatening is the key to surviving the critical situation. After this is clear to you, you might choose from the following defensive techiques:

Technique 1: Running away with the King
This is often a good idea when the current area of the king is covered by the opponents pieces, but there is some direction where you could escape to. If you are locked in the corner this is difficult to do, but if you can for example run sideways or forwards to a place with less pieces of the opponent, this can be a good way to dodge the attack.

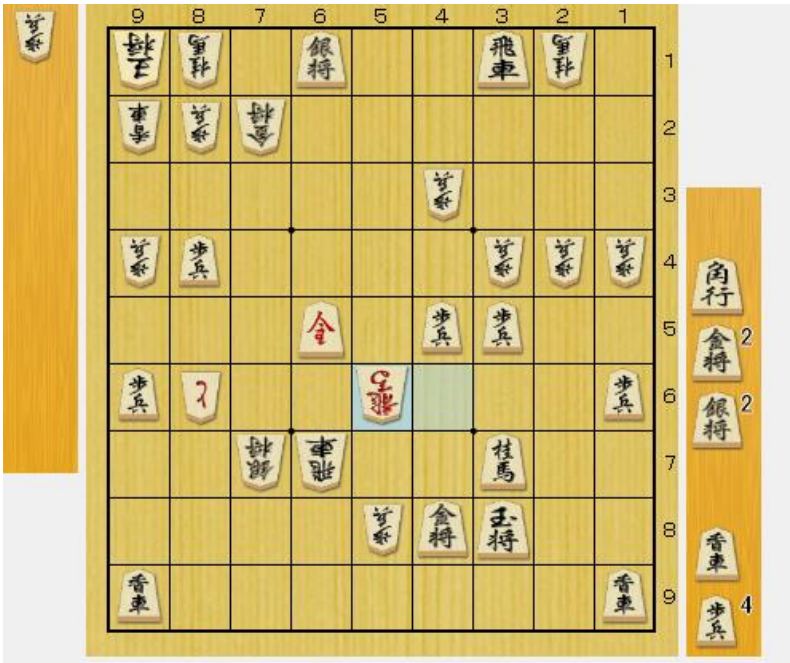
Technique 2: Defending with light pieces
When you just need to block, just need to throw in rocks, then it is better to use light pieces, as they cannot be used by the opponent, and you keep your strongest pieces for the attack. Pawns and lances are therefore ideal. This is a good idea when you don't need to defend squares around it, but just want to block a line or diagonal.

Technique 3: Defending with heavy pieces
When the pieces of the opponent get really close to the king, and there are immediate and serious threats, it might be a good idea to defend with heavy pieces like generals, because they are able to protect multiple squares at the same time. When doing this, it should be checked whether the piece can be used by the opponent after taking it.

On the following 2 pages there are 3 exercises from my game positions, where one or more of the techniques above could be used. Can you manage to survive my positions? On the page after that, answers and explanations can be found.

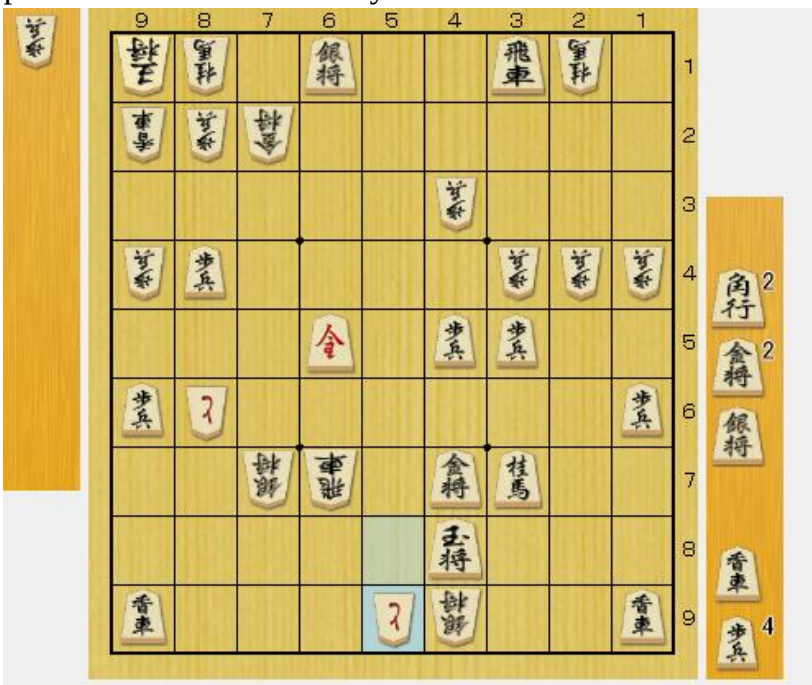
Exercise 1: Burg-Tokuni (1)

In below position I have a 2-initiative to mate starting with Sx72+. Also, I have many pieces in hand. But how to respond to the check?



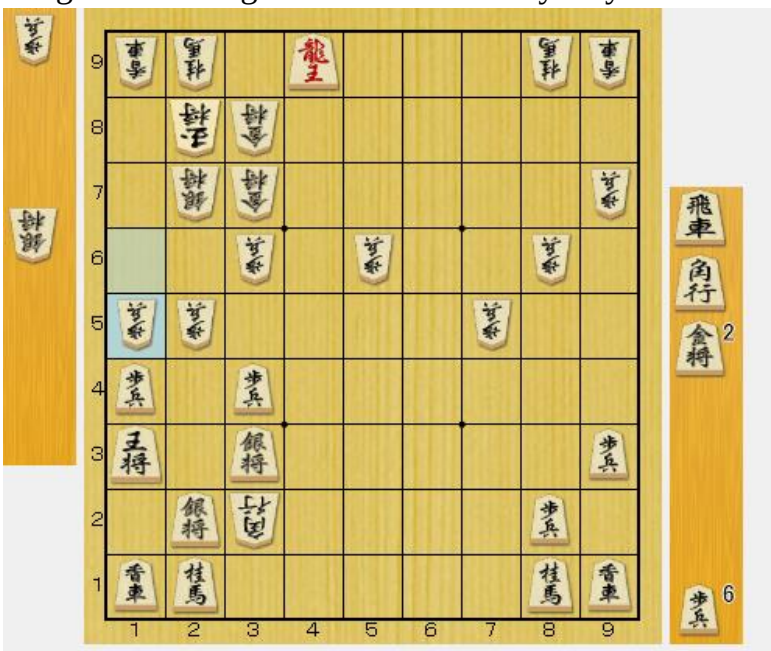
Exercise 2: Burg-Tokuni(2)

Something seems to have gone wrong already, and the King is in a very dangerous position. Is there still a way out?



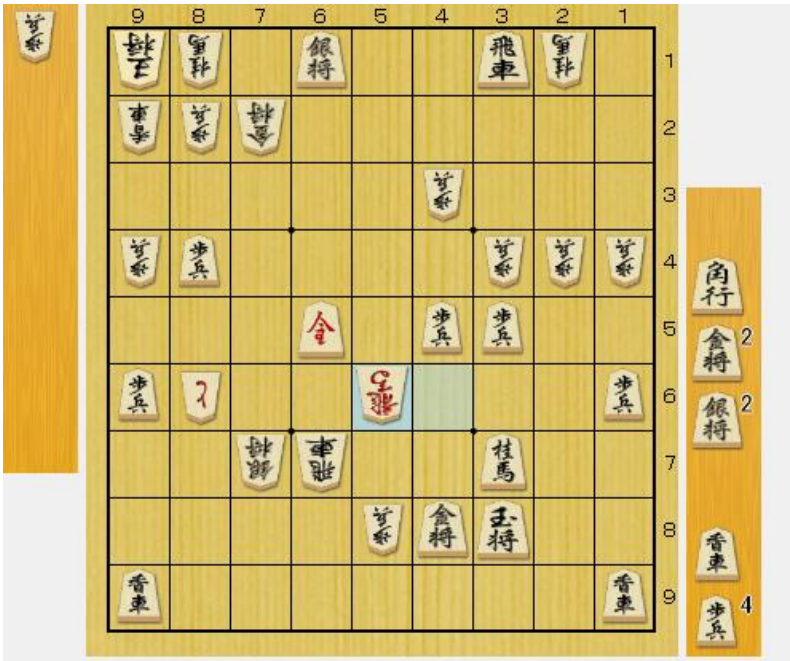
Exercise 3: Burg-Hohne

With a series of sacrifices, the opponent has been closing in to my King. With his last move, he initiated an edge attack, which seems perfect in this kind of position, as my King is on the edge and there is no easy way out. How to defend?



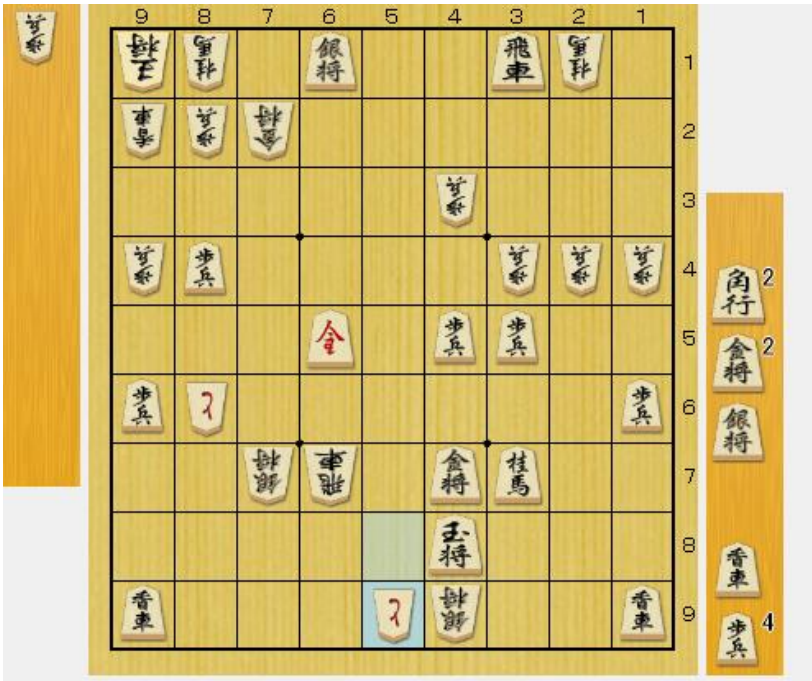
Answers to the exercises start on the following page.

Answer to Exercise 1:



In this position the King is in check, so something needs to be done about it. Running away to the side with K28 is a good idea, the King cannot be attacked there. Another good idea is to block it with a light piece, like a lance, with L*47. Blocking with a general like in the game was however not a good idea. S*47 +Bx47 Gx47 S*49 and the counterplay already was very serious. After K48 P59+ we arrived at the difficult situation of Exercise 2.

Answer to Exercise 2:

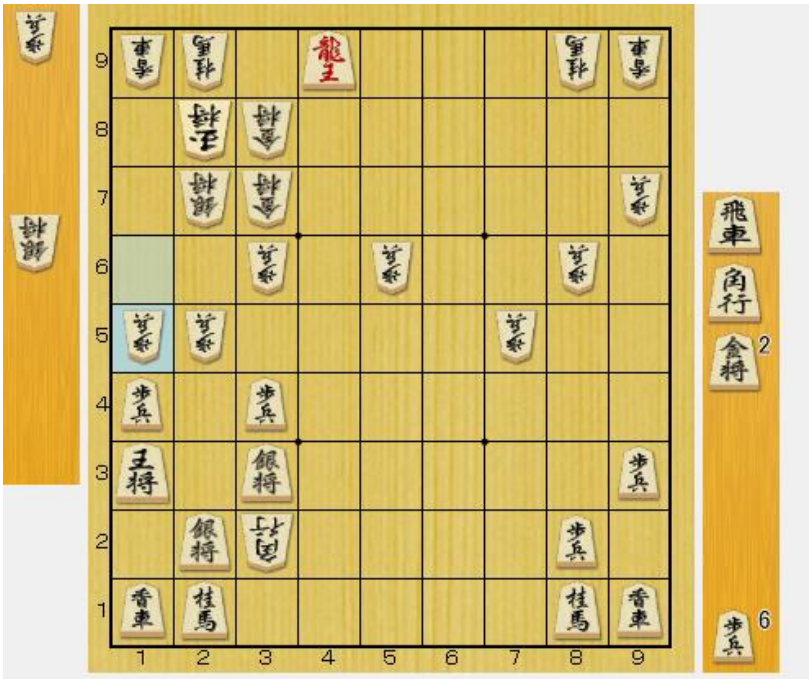


In such kind of situations **it is good to check what the threat of the opponent exactly is**, especially when you can make a brinkmate yourself. In this case the most serious threat is: R68+ K39 +R38 mate. Another attacking idea is +P58 K39 +Rx47. Therefore just defending square 38 is not enough, ideally both 38 and 47 should be protected. When realizing this, the move that covers both these squares could come logically to mind: **B*29.** This protects the key sqaures 47 and 38, so the King can next run to 39. There is also another solution.

It is getting warm around the King, is it possible to run? Moving the gold is one idea, but it loses the control over some squares and you cannot run forward after +P58. **Better is moving the Knight with N25, it gives a nice escape square 37 for the King**. On 37 suddenly 5 new squares to escape become available, so it will be difficult to catch the King while the attack on the other side is quicker.
In the game I play G*57. It seems logical to drop the Gold to protect some squares, but it is not defending against the threat. After R68+ we can see that the 58 square is not enough protected, while after K39, the 38 square is still available.

Blocking with a light piece in this situation doesn't help, as some key squares urgently needs to be covered.
So in this situation, the solution was to either escape with the King by sacrificing the Knight, or to drop the Bishop to cover the key squares.

Answer to Exercise 3:



The position looks very scary with the edge being broken, but to find the right medication, of course believing that one exists, it is important to check what is exactly the threat.
What is the threat? Px14 K12 P13+ and mate with either S*23 or S*21 on the next move, depending on the recapture. Another straightforward possibility is Px14 K12 S*13 Nx13 Px13+ Sx13 Lx13+ Kx13 S*14 K22 S23+, but currently the King can still escape via 31. So the key square is 23, because this can me made available after distracting the Silver from 22.

An early King escape is a good technique in such kind of situations. Because it will have ro run anyway, and it gives extra time for your decision. In this position, the move Px14 cannot be avoided, while Bx21+ is also a move to consider. So preparing to play K12, while thinking about what you are going to do after Px14, is a very practical way of playing. So after K12 Px14 we have the key square 23 that needs to becover, which can be done in 2 ways:

K12 Px14 G*23 is a good defensive move. As it controls the squares in the critical area. For example S*13 Nx13 Px13+ Sx13 Lx13+ Kx13, and the K22-32 also becomes available as an escape.

Defending with a light piece is in this situation also effective enough. After **K12 Px14 P*23** the defense is also good, although the situation remains.

Improve your shogi

We have seen different situations in which one or more of the mentioned techniques could be used. Did you also miss a good defense in a critical situation? Then it is good to understand which kind of move had to be used, and why. This will order your thought structure for next time, which is really useful in stressful situations! Moreover solving Tsume problems is a good way of practising your endgame skills. You will be more effective not only in mating yourself, but also in recognizing the opponent's threats. Good luck!

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