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Clausewitz and His Impact on Strategy

by LTC Goh Teck Seng

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To assess Clausewitz's impact on strategy, is to establish the relevance of Clausewitzian thinking to strategic thought and policy. Relevance defines impact, for only that which is relevant endures as a legacy, and a legacy expresses an impact.

Based upon the strategy-impact framework outlined, this essay will first give an overview of Clausewitz's theory of war and then evaluate its impact on strategy.

CLAUSEWITZ'S THEORY OF WAR

Karl von Clausewitz (1780 -1831) premised his work on answering the twin questions of the nature of war and how war might be studied.¹ His magnum opus, *vom Kriege (On War)*², which crystallises the philosophical nature of war and its universal dynamics, is a reflective study on Napoleonic warfare.

Clausewitz defined war as "an act of violence to compel our opponent to fulfill our will".³ Yet war is not senseless violence; its essence lies in its being "the continuation of policy with the admixture of other means".⁴

War, thus rationalised, becomes an instrument of policy: politics then exerts a primacy over its conduct since war is but "the means [*Mittel*] to achieve a predetermined (political) end [*Zweck*]"⁵. As the "guiding intelligence", politics should shape the nature of war and the preferred strategy in terms of determining the focus and proportion of force to be employed.⁶

If war is violence based on rationality, it is also "an act of force ...(the application of which knows) ... no logical limit".⁷ Therefore, "absolute war", or total war, can theoretically result from the unconstrained interaction between the offence and defence - "the collision of two living forces"⁸ - by virtue of its escalatory dynamics.

Clausewitz's "absolute war" is a Platonic ideal, to which "real war" only approximates.⁹ "Real war" is always limited, never reaching its absoluteness because of extraneous constraints and the "friction" of war.¹⁰ "Friction" derives from the unpredictability of combat performance as combatants are subject to the toil and life-threatening dangers of war; and from uncertainty, or the "fog of war" due to imperfect intelligence.¹¹

In the Clausewitzian perspective, the character of war is shaped by the "trinity" of "primordial violence, hatred and enmity; political purpose and effect; as well as the play of chance and probability" (or otherwise termed the irrational, rational and non-rational forces).¹² How each leg of the trinity interacts with one or both of the other would shape the outcome of war, implying that any disequilibrium in the "trinitarian" balance would be adverse.

Clausewitz consequently suggested the need for political and military leaders to work co-operatively; for public opinion to be managed; for military commanders, because of the need to overcome "friction" and chance in war, to display "genius"¹³; and for the army to possess a strong will because while combat tests moral and physical forces, "the physical (is but only) the wooden hilt, whereas the moral factor is the ... finely-honed blade".¹⁴ Moral and psychological factors were central to Clausewitz's analysis of war.¹⁵

Clausewitz further propounded the ideal strategy as being to identify the enemy's centre of gravity and concentrate all efforts on destroying it through the decisive battle. A "centre of gravity" is that part of an enemy which, if destroyed, will cause his collapse, since it is "the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends".¹⁶ As Clausewitz advocated,

"... aim for the great object to achieve the utmost concentration of force ... in order to annihilate the enemy in a major *decisive battle* and to destroy the ability of the enemy state to resist".¹⁷

IMPACT ON STRATEGY

If strategy is defined in strictly military terms as "the art of distributing and providing military means to fulfill the ends of policy"¹⁸, what may be assessed of Clausewitz's impact? Impact may be distinguished between "influencing" and "direct". Where the impact is "influencing", it has provided a paradigm for evaluating strategy. Where it is "direct", it has resulted in elements of Clausewitz's thinking being operationalised in specific approaches to war.

The first word on Clausewitz's impact is that he has been an immeasurable influence on strategy. Clausewitz provided a theory on war asserting that war is a social phenomenon, being neither a science nor an art with its compound of "rational, irrational and non-rational forces". His theory thus formulated serves not as a model, but a guide, for strategy formulation, which suggests *not what*, but *how*, to think about strategy. As Clausewitz emphasised,

"Theory does not mean a "scaffolding" supporting man in action or a "positive direction for action... It should educate the mind of the future leader in war, or rather guide him in his self-instruction, but not accompany him to the field of battle; just as a sensible tutor forms and enlightens the opening mind of a youth without keeping him in leading strings all his life".¹⁹

The timelessness of Clausewitz's theory is his most durable influence; for it constitutes a frame of reference and a point of departure for any analysis of strategy. Clausewitz accordingly exerted strong intellectual influence on Prussian, French and British military thought before World War I.²⁰

Moltke and Schlieffen were self-confessed Clausewitzians²¹, with *On War* being the "Bible" for the German officer corps²²; the French, reeling from their defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), turned to Clausewitz for intellectual guidance through officers such as Foch²³; and the British underwent a "renaissance of Clausewitz studies" after the Boer War with his ideas strongly influencing military teaching at Camberley, the writings of men like Murray and Wilkinson and General Haig's edition of the *Field Service Regulations* which used explicitly Clausewitzian terminology like "centre of gravity".²⁴

Clausewitz's influence has extended wider to naval and air warfare. Naval strategists like Corbett and airpower theorists like Douhet owed their theorising to Clausewitz.²⁵ Corbett had based his analysis of seapower on Clausewitz's concepts of limited war and war as a continuation of policy²⁶; whereas airpower theorists had invoked the ideas of "centre of gravity" and the "decisive blow" in their propositions.²⁷

As for Clausewitz's *direct* impact, his thinking was selectively implemented in turn-of-the-century German and French armies. Clausewitz's point about seeking out the enemy's centre of gravity resulted in these armies "idolising" the decisive battle and developing the cult of the offence. The French doctrine of the "offensive *a outrance*" and the German plans for invading France in 1870 and 1914 (founded on Clausewitz's "*Plan of a War Designed to Lead to the Total Defeat of an Enemy*") exemplify his direct impact on strategy.²⁸

More recently, the rediscovery of Clausewitz in the US following its Vietnam War defeat inspired a strategic rethinking "on the highest levels of the military and political leadership".²⁹ With it came a codification of lessons learnt into the Weinberger Doctrine of 1984.³⁰

Indeed, so dominant was Clausewitz on the US military-strategic scene from the 1970s to the 1980s that: *On War* was adopted by the Naval War College in 1976; the Air War College in 1978; and the Army War College in 1981.³¹ Clausewitzian thinking has also found its way into the Army's manual FM 100-5: *Operations* (1982) and the Marine Corps' FMFM 1: *Warfighting* (1989).³²

The Gulf War, drawing upon the Weinberger Doctrine, with its clear definition of political purpose and consolidation of popular and allied support was waged in classic Clausewitzian style. For at the heart of it was an adherence to the "trinitarian" balance.³³

But is Clausewitz still relevant in the nuclear age? Nuclear weapons have both invalidated and reaffirmed Clausewitz's thinking. The absolute war that Clausewitz considered an abstraction has become real with nuclear weapons. Consequently, no nuclear war may be fought for any meaningful ends, if war is the continuation of policy by other means.

Nevertheless, Clausewitz's theory has provided a framework for evaluating strategy for the nuclear age. The concepts of nuclear deterrence and limited war (particularly Robert Osgood's treatment of the subject in his book *Limited War*) are grounded in Clausewitzian theorising about the rationality of war.³⁴

There are however, critics of Clausewitz, the leading contemporary ones being John Keegan and Martin van Creveld. Both base their arguments on the irrelevance of the Clausewitzian "trinity", since wars before the Treaty of Westphalia were fought without nation-states (van Creveld)³⁵; and war, in general, is not fought for political purposes (Keegan).³⁶ The rebuttal is that both critics have based their criticisms on a faulty construct of the "trinity" as simply "people, army and government".³⁷ Their flawed premise has undermined their criticisms of Clausewitz.

CONCLUSION

The last word on Clausewitz's impact on strategy is expressed in a question, "Has it been revolutionary?".

If the term "revolutionary" implies a distinct break from a previous pattern of approach to strategy, Clausewitz's ideas can hardly be described as such. After all, Clausewitz was an interpreter, not the originator, of Napoleonic warfare; he was able to distill the essence of Napoleon's art of war in its wider socio-political context and formulate a succinct theory of war.

But Clausewitz's monumental contribution must nevertheless be recognised. He has bequeathed to later generations a framework for effective strategy formulation, if strategy concerns employing "military means to achieve policy ends". Clausewitz's legacy is rooted in a singular fact: *On War* primarily describes and analyses war; it does not essentially prescribe or proscribe; therefore whatever the interpretation, something of enduring value persists.

Yet Clausewitz's impact on strategy has been principally "influencing" rather than "direct". To the extent that it is "influencing", his ideas have been adopted, adapted and propagated by strategists dealing in nearly all spheres of warfare. The cumulative effect of this is that Clausewitzian thinking presently "run(s) like a subterranean river through all of military thought".³⁸ Against this, criticisms of Clausewitz exist only as dissenting voices on the fringes in a heavily Clausewitz-influenced, but not fully Clausewitz-converted, world.

Concluding metaphorically on Clausewitz, the grand master may be likened to "the long, invisible hand of strategy extending over a span of 150 years either directly shaping strategy or otherwise, pointing out the relevant first-order considerations of strategy formulation". The impact of Clausewitz on strategy, though not revolutionary, has nevertheless cut deep.

ENDNOTES

1. Peter Paret, "Clausewitz" in Peter Paret (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p.186. For a comprehensive treatment of Clausewitz's life, his time and influences, see Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); and Peter Paret, *Understanding War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).
2. *On War*, which comprises eight books, is organised into 128 chapters and sections. Book I is entitled "On the Nature of War"; Book II "On the Theory of War"; Book III "On Strategy in General"; Book IV "The Engagement"; Book V "Military Forces"; Book VI "defence"; Book VII "The Attack"; and finally, Book VIII "War Plans". Clausewitz invested 12 years writing *On War* but did not finish it at the time of his death in 1831. It had to be published posthumously in 1832 by his wife and brother-in-law. The book did not gain immediate fame; nevertheless by 1860, it had established itself as a classic. For a summary of Clausewitz's arguments, see Wendell Coats, "Clausewitz's Theory of War: An Alternative View", *Comparative Strategy*, Vol 5, No 4, 1986.
3. H. Rothfels, "Clausewitz" in Edward Mead Earle (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 102.
4. Quoted in Michael Howard, *Clausewitz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p.34.
5. *Ibid.*, p.35.
6. *Ibid.*, p.38.
7. Paret, op. cit., p.199.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Howard, op. cit., p.49. A Platonic ideal is, as Peter Paret put it, also a philosophical ideal. Clausewitz devised the ideal of "absolute war" as a perfect standard against which all manifestations of war could be compared. In the absence of such an idealised standard, any analysis of war in practice would lack a uniform reference point.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51. The idea of "friction" is not new in war. What Clausewitz had done was to highlight it as a key component of war and incorporate it as a distinct variable into a theoretical structure despite his admission that "friction" could not be adequately accommodated by theory. "Friction", in the Clausewitzian conception, referred to uncertainties, errors, accidents, technical difficulties as well as the unforeseen and their impact on actions, decisions and morale. Unlike mechanical friction which could be localised to points where a moving part came into contact with another, "friction" in war could occur anywhere and at any time. Just as the straightforward action of walking was difficult if attempted in water, so action in war - which was theoretically simple - was hampered by its own resistant medium, namely "friction".
11. Patrick Cronin, "Clausewitz Condensed", *Military Review*, Vol 65, No 8, August 1985, p. 41.
12. Edward Villacres and Christopher Bassford, "[Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity](#)", *Parameters*, Vol XXV, No 3, Autumn 1995, p. 13. Villacres and Bassford argued that the Clausewitzian "trinity" had over time been simplified as referring simply to "the people, the military and the government". This, according to them, was a distortion which needed to be corrected. The accurate interpretation of the Clausewitzian "trinity" is as spelt out in the text of this essay.
13. "Genius", as Clausewitz described it, was not a singular trait but an almagam generally of courage,

intellect as well as strength of will and character. "courage" consisted of two forms: an individual quality characterised by an indifference to danger and courage inspired by higher motivations of patriotism, ambition or enthusiasm. According to Clausewitz, the highest degree of courage comprised proportions of both kinds. As for "intellect", Clausewitz saw this as the sensitive and discriminating judgement military commanders must exercise to deal with imperfect intelligence, unforeseen circumstances and all such other uncertainties of war. "Strength of will" referred to the personal capacity of the military commander to withstand the demoralising effects of war and therefore to not only retain hold on his men, but to reinvigorate them to achieve the mission despite setbacks. Finally, "strength of character" touched on the ability of the commander to maintain his balance and convictions in spite of strong emotional pressures. See Karl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), pp. 115-122.

14. Howard, *Clausewitz*, p. 26.

15. Rothfels, "Clausewitz" in Earle, op. cit., p. 112. Rothfels argued that the heavy emphasis on moral and psychological factors stood out as the most pronounced of Clausewitz's permanent contribution to military thought. Specific chapters of the book *On War* are devoted to a discussion of this subject (I, III; II, III; III, III-VIII).

16. Howard, *Clausewitz*, p. 39. Clausewitz identified the enemy's centre of gravity as being any of the following: the enemy's army; his capital; his protector; or the community of interests that holds together an alliance.

17. Azar Gat, *The Origins of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to Clausewitz* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 211.

18. Williamson Murray and Mark Grimsley, "Introduction: On Strategy" in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox and Alvin Bernstein (ed.), *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States and War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.1. Broader definitions of "strategy" exist, but this essay adopts the definition which best facilitates an evaluation of Clausewitz's impact since the grand master dealt with strategy on the military plane.

19. Rothfels, "Clausewitz" in Earle, op. cit., p. 101.

20. Bassford, [Clausewitz in English](#) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.4.

21. Rothfels, "Clausewitz" in Earle, op. cit., p. 93; and Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), p. 34. To be sure, Schlieffen and Moltke were not themselves Clausewitz reincarnates; they were influenced by Clausewitz, but even then they adopted Clausewitz only where his arguments suited their strategic predispositions. For instance, Moltke himself believed in the autonomy of war, rather than war as an extension of policy. See also "Clausewitz and the Rise of Prussian Military Hegemony" in Hew Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 90-104.

22. Jehuda Wallach, *The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation: The Theories of Clausewitz and Schlieffen and Their Impact on the German Conduct of Two World Wars* (London: Greenwood Press, 1986), p. 9.

23. See Azar Gat, *The Development of Military Thought: The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 114-134.

24. Bassford, op. cit., pp. 104-107. For the influence of Clausewitz on J.F.C. Fuller and Liddell Hart, see Jay Luvaas, "Clausewitz, Fuller and Liddell Hart" in *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, No 2, Vol 9, June/September 1986.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 96-99; and Howard, *Clausewitz*, p. 68.

26. Bassford, op. cit., p. 97.

27. Howard, op. cit., p. 68.

28. Douglas Porch "Clausewitz and the French: 1871-1914" in Michael Handel (ed.), *Clausewitz and Modern Strategy* (London: Frank Cass, 1986), p.287; and Bassford, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
29. Michael Handel, *Masters of War: Sun Tzu, Clausewitz and Jomini* (London: Frank Cass, 1992), p. 11.
30. *Ibid.* The Weinberger Doctrine is the US' strategic adaptation for the post-Vietnam War era. It lists six conditions for US participation in any war. Frequently quoted during the numerous debates concerning military action in the Gulf War, the Doctrine explicitly cites Clausewitz in the third of the six conditions: "As Clausewitz wrote, 'No one starts a war without first being clear in the mind what he intends to achieve by that war, and how he intends to conduct it.'"
31. Bassford, *op. cit.*, p. 204.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Handel, *Masters*, pp. 9-15.
34. Howard, *Clausewitz*, pp. 60-70; and Bassford, *op. cit.*, pp. 200-202. For Clausewitz's impact on nuclear strategy and the nuclear strategists, see Stephen Cimbala, *Clausewitz and Escalation: Classical Perspective on Nuclear Strategy* (London: Frank Cass, 1991); see also Bruce Nardulli, "Clausewitz and the Re-orientation of Nuclear Strategy", *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol 5, No 4, December 1982.
35. Van Creveld, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-57.
36. John Keegan, *The History of Warfare* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p.3. Arguments against Clausewitz's relevance can also be found in John Shephard, "On War: Is Clausewitz Still Relevant?", *Parameters*, Vol XX, No 3, September 1990. In it, Shephard argues that Clausewitz is no longer relevant due to the rise of nuclear weapons, transnational constabulary warfare and modern statecraft - elements which did not exist in Clausewitz's time.
37. Villacres and Bassford, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-17.
38. Bassford, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

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