

# THE 'CENTRE OF GRAVITY' CONCEPT IN CLAUSEWITZ'S 'ON WAR'

By MAJ Edward Khoo Chun Kiat

## ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author seeks to illustrate that even though the concept of centre of gravity may be abstract it can still be of use to military planners. He highlighted various problems with the concept such as how subjectivity and mistranslation which could lead to confusion and lack of utility. This is seen from the lack of a common definition of the centre of gravity, and how different conclusions can be derived from the multitude of conflicting methodologies that have arisen even in the same scenario. However, the author also explains how the centre of gravity can still be a useful concept as it helps planners understand increasingly complex operating environments by revealing relations within the multiple systems, distinguishing between the important and the peripheral. This therefore enables planners to focus actions on what are important and enhances efficiency.

*Keywords: CoG; War; Planning; Military; Strategy*

*"Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult."*

-Carl von Clausewitz

## WHAT IS CENTRE OF GRAVITY

'The hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends', is what we understood of the Centre of Gravity (CoG) concept, which was introduced by Carl von Clausewitz in his masterpiece, *'On War'* in 1832. Decades of researches, debates and operational applications have resulted in the numerous definitions of CoG available today. Even though CoG identification is considered the centerpiece of military planning, military practitioners still struggle with it, planners still misapply it, and commanders still search in vain for it. At best, this suggests that the concept is still an unsettled theory; at worst, it is not only irrelevant, it is a detrimental distraction.<sup>1</sup>

## ESSAY'S POSITION

In this essay, the author deliberates that the concept, although is abstract, is still of use to military planners. This is because, given the correct situation, with a clear definition and common methodology within the planning team, it still focuses on planning efforts.

The author first explains why the concept is abstract. He then elaborates on why critics are skeptical about the concept and argue that it is too abstract to be of use. Thereafter, he proceeds to demonstrate the

utility of the concept and its importance. Finally, the author goes on to discuss the limitations of the concept so that military practitioners and planners know when and how to apply it.

## ROOT PROBLEM & DIFFERING ACCEPTANCE OF CONCEPT

The original work by Clausewitz was written in German. Some have argued that Clausewitz's derivation of CoGs is intuitive in nature and as such, there lies a degree of subjectivity within.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the widely used translation by Howard and Pret in 1984—"The hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed"—was criticised for its flaws in translation and is very much the culprit for much of the contentions in the contemporary understanding of the concept and its utility in the modern world.<sup>3</sup> The element of subjectivity and mistranslation has caused confusion, generated a diverse view on the concept, cast doubts on its application in the real world and divided opinions on its utility.

These opinions can be categorised into three groups of followers: the traditionalists, the rejectionists and the accommodators.<sup>4</sup> The Clausewitzian traditionalists are the advocates of Clausewitz's concepts, who believe that concepts raised by Clausewitz hold more weight than their actual utility. The rejectionists, however, are not troubled about the intellectuality of such concepts but are concerned with

its practicality. The accommodators, like the rejectionists, find utility of the concepts important to them as well. However, instead of outright rejecting the concepts, the accommodators try to resolve it by redefining the concept and applying it contextually.

## UNDERSTANDING THE ACHILLES OF THE COG CONCEPT

Critics reject the concept for three main reasons. Firstly, there are numerous definitions; it is fundamentally illogical for something so important to not have a common definition. Secondly, given the same scenario, the many methodologies may not derive the same CoG. Lastly, the difficulties in identifying correct CoGs across various planning level and aligning them to strategic CoG.

**Instead of focusing planning effort, the employment of service biased methods to derive CoG and all arriving at different conclusions, will only create disruption at the joint planning headquarters.**

### Multiple Definitions

Multiple definitions are one of the main stumbling blocks for the concept. Anything that is so controversial, debatable, unclear and continually changing is a weak foundation on which to build a plan.<sup>5</sup> Differences in their operating environments and services' capabilities resulted in respective services in the American military each having their own definition of the concept. For the Army and Navy typically though, in terms of a single CoG, which will reside at the core of land or sea power, and provides the source of physical and psychological capacity to fight.<sup>6</sup> The Air Force, on the other hand, envisioned multiple centres, each targeted from the air to paralyse an enemy. The Marine Corps has long regarded CoG as a critical vulnerability. Thus, the concept has assumed many guises over the years.<sup>7</sup>

Herein lies the drawback with the concept—the ambiguous representation of the concept resulted in different definitions by various services and thus, many

different CoGs identified in an operation. Instead of focusing the planning effort in defeating the enemy by targeting one CoG, the concept has generated multiple CoGs, created an incoherent planning headquarters, expended extra resources and time to defeat the adversary.

This was evident in *Operation Desert Storm*. In that operation, the absence of universal and well-developed CoG definitions resulted in poor unity of effort and synchronisation.<sup>8</sup> General Schwarzkopf, the overall campaign commander had derived three CoGs, two of which, the leadership and command and control assets coincides with General Horner, the commander of the Air Force for the operation. His last CoG was not considered by the Air Forces as a CoG and in addition, the Air Force had further identified 12 other targets as CoGs. Consequently, each service fought independently within their own domain, in a campaign riddled with frictions.<sup>9</sup> The very concept that was supposed to focus planning and operation effort, improve unity and efficiency, ironically divided the planning team's effort. One should not be surprised to see why critics are fast in condemning and rejecting the concept.

### Multiple Methodologies

We have witnessed multiple military professionals' efforts in refining the concept to operationalise it. Joseph Strange, a professor of Strategic Studies in the Marine Corps War College and a former Army officer and John Warden, a retired US (United States) Air Force (USAF) Colonel are two such examples. Each of them derived their own methodology. Warden's Strategic Ring Theory and Strange's Critical Capability – Critical Requirement – Critical Vulnerability Concept, from their own understanding and experience.

Each service approaches CoG analysis systematically, but nearly always ends in a tautology.<sup>10</sup> The problem is each of these efforts are biased due to the originator's experience with operation environments and an understanding of their past service's capabilities. In his Strategic Ring Theory, Warden established the five levels of system elements and that each level has a CoG.<sup>11</sup> Due to his experience and training with the Air Force, he advocates strategic bombing and is convinced that by hitting all the CoGs, it can neutralise the leadership and trigger paralysis. He connotes the possibility of hitting all the CoGs at once

because the Air Force can. On the other hand, Strange, being an Army officer, clearly understood that it is impossible for the Army to strike multiple CoGs at once. Thus, explains his logical and systematic means of identifying each of the critical factors and only to strike that one CoG, the one that mattered most at any given time. All the services claim to have procedures for identifying CoGs, but none of their doctrine states how to derive it.<sup>12</sup>

Smith, Jeter and Westgaard, in 2015, have used multiple approaches to study the CoG for Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). They concluded that all methods provided structured processes for identifying CoGs and they arrived at a somewhat similar but not identical conclusion.<sup>13</sup> This compounds the problem. With different methods, planners at best can only arrive at a similar but not identical CoGs. Post World War I (WWI), most, if not all military operations involve joint participation. This is especially true in modern days. Instead of focusing planning effort, the employment of service biased methods to derive CoG and all arriving at different conclusions, will only create disruption at the joint planning headquarters. Yet again, it is little wonder why critics reject the concept.

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## Multiple Levels Of Planning

'It is worth noting that Clausewitz does not distinguish among tactical, operational and strategic CoGs.'<sup>14</sup> However, due to the advancement in technology, the ways and means of warfare have changed considerably since Napoleon's time. Doctrinally, the planning of war is stratified across three levels—tactical, operational and strategic.<sup>15</sup> Today, CoG is seen to exist for every level of command.<sup>16</sup> This created two problems. Firstly, a few CoGs will be identified across the levels and it is the responsibility of the commander to strike the correct one.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, the CoGs across all levels must link, without which, the military will find itself involved in a conflict that is lacking purpose.<sup>18</sup>

The Vietnam War was an example at which the tactical and operational CoGs did not link with the strategic CoG. Primarily, the US military failed to understand that it was not a proxy war on ideology but rather a civil war, which resulted in the misidentification of a strategic CoG that was largely responsible for defeat.<sup>19</sup> The CoG is not Ho Chi Minh's government, but the peoples' will to not be ruled by a foreign power again. This is not a force that can be dissolved using military means, which is why tactical units' success do not translate to victory.

The tactical and operational CoGs are keys that open the doors to victory, but not victory itself. The strategic CoG is. Finding the correct CoG is challenging; to find a few stretching across the various planning levels and the need to align them with the strategic CoG is certainly an arduous task, which is why critics are skeptical on the concept.



*President Kennedy's news conference of 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 1961.*

## UTILITY OF THE COG CONCEPT

Despite the criticisms, the author believes that CoG remains applicable and will continue to do so because it still has utility. This utility is defined as the ability to contribute to planning by improving understanding, focusing planning and improving efficiency.<sup>20</sup> The roles of military planners are to identify goals, determine missions, assess comparative advantage and risk, calculate costs and benefits.<sup>21</sup> The correct identification of CoG precisely facilitates this. It helps planners to identify what needs to be done to achieve aims and consequently, to assess whether benefits are important enough to justify the associated costs and risks. It forms the foundation and provides the focus for planning.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, by identifying the correct CoG, it enhances understanding, focuses planning and improves efficiency.<sup>23</sup>

The identification of the correct CoG is paramount to the success of achieving the aim too. A good example would be General MacArthur's plan for the Battle of Inchon—hitting North Korea's weaker rear elements in order to break out from the Busan Perimeter and push the North Koreans back to the borders. The converse is true as well. The Japanese misidentified America's carrier groups in the Pacific as the CoG instead of her people's will and industrial

might. Had Japan not misjudged this and avoided the attack on Pearl Harbour, which triggered America's retaliation by participating in the war in the Pacific, the outcome of World War II (WWII) for the Japanese would have been very different.<sup>24</sup>

Since the end of the Vietnam War, we have witnessed the revival of the CoG concept, the many debates over its true meaning and its application in multiple operations by the world's leading military power, the US. All these efforts are proof that this age-old concept is still valuable for the military today. Denouncing the concept by claiming that it is abstract, oversimplifying things and it cannot be applied in today's complex environment do no justice to the concept. Changes in time, technology and modern military doctrines do not necessarily make the concept irrelevant, because the concept focuses on the art of planning, the bread and butter of military planners.<sup>25</sup>

The value of the concept will not be doubted once military professionals are able to utilise it productively. Therefore, the objective is to operationalise the concept successfully. However, over the years, literal interpretation of the concept led practitioners to misunderstand the deeper underlying ideas.<sup>26</sup> The challenge then is how to reverse this misconstrued understanding and confusion. The shift of



*Photograph of Battleship Row taken from a Japanese plane at the beginning of the attack (on Pearl Harbour). The explosion in the center is a torpedo strike on USS West Virginia. Two attacking Japanese planes can be seen: one over USS Neosho and one over the Naval Yard.*



definition from metaphors to language based on clarity, logic and precision, and testability by some Neo-Clausewitzian is one good effort to swing the motion in the right direction.<sup>27</sup>

**In such asymmetric warfare, the ideas of success and failures are intangible, the CoG lies in the hearts and minds of the population, something that cannot be defeated by military might.**

## LIMITATIONS OF THE CONCEPT

Unlike the laws of physics, a concept remains a concept and has its limitation. It cannot be applied universally and timelessly. It is only right for practitioners to understand these limitations before adopting it, failure of which will only distract the planning team by leading them on a wild goose chase.

Firstly, the CoG concept cannot be applied for every type of war. It is applicable to wars designed to defeat adversaries. In such wars, military and political objectives are essentially complementary. Whereas in limited wars, CoG tend to compete with restrictive political objectives.<sup>28</sup> The First Gulf War was a conflict with limited aims and the concept should not have been applied. General Schwarzkopf's notion of the enemy's CoG did not accord with those of General Horner. As a result, the planners were more concerned about what the CoGs were, as opposed to what to do with it. The force fitting concept was unnecessary as translating the war's strategic objectives, the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, into operational and tactical objectives would still have identified the capabilities the coalition forces had to defeat in order to be successful.<sup>29</sup> Unless political aim and military aim are in line with the goal of rendering the enemy defenceless, searching for CoG is unnecessary and possibly counterproductive. In a limited war, the collapse of an opponent might not serve the political purposes and could run counter to them.<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, as it is impossible to know before hand with any degree of certainty whether the CoG has been correctly determined due to the uncertainty nature of war, planners must be cognisant that CoG can change and should not be too adamant on fixing to only those that have been identified.<sup>31</sup> The lack of focus caused by inter-service definition problems is not the worst outcome of the use of CoG. Instead, the telescopic focus to a single CoG but getting it wrong and declining to adjust is.<sup>32</sup> Leaders and planners must remember that they are handling a dynamic situation and not observing a static system. They are fighting a thinking enemy and not one sitting duck. In 2005, General Casey's team misidentified the Iraqi government as the true CoG. The insurgency in Iraq rose to a new level of violence in 2006.<sup>33</sup> The situation only improved after Petraeus took command and changed the COG to focus on a population centric counterinsurgency strategy. The fixated minds of the first team caused them to disregard new developments, especially when it is something that did not fit their initial assessment. This resulted in dire consequences and will continue to do so, if planners do not understand that COG can change.



*Public memorials for the victims died in the November 2015 Paris attacks, and police near the scenes of some of the attacks. November 2015 Paris attacks is part of Terrorism in Europe and the spillover of the Syrian Civil War.*

Finally, transnational terrorism threat is different in nature as compared to a conventional security threat. The battling of ideology is not a threat that can be answered with military strength alone. In addition, technology and social media have allowed the enemy to be connected, yet independent from each other. Under such circumstances, there is limited utility for the CoG concept. Firstly, the lack of overarching system means there is no focal point at which military force can target. Destroying ISIS cells in Europe does no harm to the cells in Southeast Asia. Secondly, the effectiveness of using military force to fight an ideology comes into question. In fact, it is counterproductive—the more tactical and operational success you gain, the further you are away from strategic victory. In such asymmetric warfare, the ideas of success and failures are intangible, the CoG lies in the hearts and minds of the population, something that cannot be defeated by military might.

## CONCLUSION

The CoG concept remains abstract but is still and will continue to be relevant because it has utility to planners. It helps them to understand increasingly complex operating environments by revealing relations within the multiple systems, distinguishing between the important and the peripheral. This enables planners to focus actions on what are important and enhances efficiency. However, this is, after all, a concept. In the fast paced volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) environment, dealing with dynamic enemies, military practitioners must understand its limitations. Today's military would do well to ensure that those trained in identifying CoG are taught to know how and when to use it, rather than meaninglessly forced fitting it into every situation, which may result in frustration and only then, to lament the concept is too abstract to be of use.

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**MAJ Edward Khoo Chun Kiat** is an Infantry Officer by vocation and is currently the Intelligence Officer of 2<sup>nd</sup> Singapore Infantry Brigade. He graduated from the National University of Singapore with a Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Life Sciences with Specialisation in Environmental Biology.