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21st Century?**

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ABSTRACT

The author highlights that many contemporary military strategists and practitioners value the philosophies contained in Carl Von Clausewitz's classic *On War* and its relevance to present day conflict. On the other hand, there are also speculation and debates over Clausewitz's relevance to contemporary conflict as well. In this essay, the author compares, contrasts and critically assesses the competing views of Clausewitz's applicability to modern warfare and analyses whether there is value for military leaders in studying his theories. In particular, he explores two authors' views, Strachan's *The Direction of War* and Kalder's *Inconclusive Wars*, which offer conflicting arguments on Clausewitz's relevance in these global times. He scrutinises these competing arguments and by supplementing them with additional examples, affirms that Clausewitz's theory is applicable and appropriate to contemporary military operations.

Keywords: Warfare, Contemporary, Conventional, Environment, Guerrilla

INTRODUCTION

'The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.'

- Hew Strachan¹

Carl Von Clausewitz was a Prussian General during the 18th and 19th centuries who fought in the Napoleonic Wars. He is most renowned for the development of military theory in his strategy manuscript, *On War*, which was compiled following his death by his wife, Marie Von Clausewitz in 1832. Many contemporary military strategists and practitioners highly value the philosophies contained within *On War* and its relevance to present day conflicts. However, there are still speculation which exists and debates which regularly occur over Clausewitz's relevance to contemporary conflict. This essay will compare, contrast and critically assess the competing views of Clausewitz's applicability to modern warfare and analyse whether there is value for military leaders in studying his theories. Two suggested references, Strachan's *The Direction of War* and Kalder's *Inconclusive Wars*, offer conflicting arguments on Clausewitz's relevance in these global times. This essay will explore these competing arguments and by supplementing with additional examples, will affirm that Clausewitz's theory is



Carl Von Clausewitz (1780 to 1831)

applicable and appropriate to contemporary military operations.

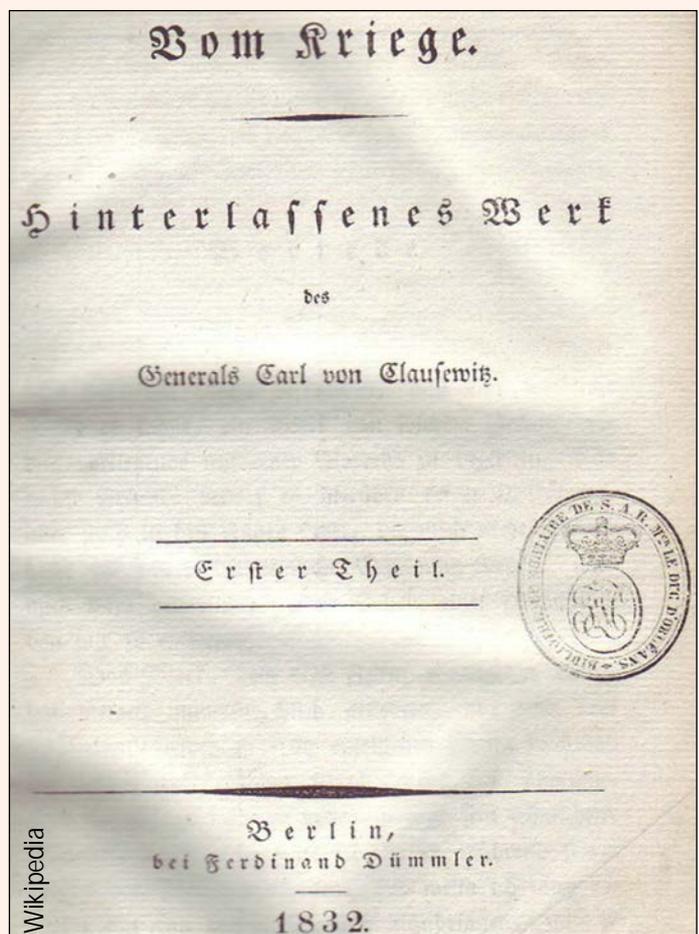
Many analysts debate the relevance that Clausewitz has to modern war, conflict and operations. These arguments appear too simplistic—primarily challenging the theoretical technicalities associated with Clausewitz's theories rather than the overarching concepts. A greater appreciation into the content of *On War* and what Clausewitz's philosophies are striving to explain may offer an alternative viewpoint for many of Clausewitz's critics. This essay will argue that the

concepts defined in Clausewitz's *On War* are applicable to contemporary conflicts and military operations.

Hew Strachan and Mary Kalder offer two distinct points of view. Kalder argues that Clausewitz is no longer relevant to contemporary warfare while Strachan disputes Clausewitz's critics by discussing his significance to modern conflict. Kalder primarily debates the present day relevance of Clausewitz arguing that these philosophies cannot be applied due to the required focus of the opposing forces on the 'destruction of a military force as the foundation for all action in war.'² The premise of her argument is that contemporary operations are rarely focused solely on the destruction or annihilation of an opponent, but rather trying to achieve an effect that results in a strategic outcome. This effect may in fact result in no opposing force losses. Kalder also claims that modern conflict is rarely between states—rather that it is often between a state and non-state actor. Once again, the measure of success between the two opponents is not the total destruction of each other but to achieve a political or strategic outcome. It is due to this that Kalder argues the philosophies in Clausewitz are irrelevant to modern warfare because the aim of this military operation is not to achieve total destruction of the enemy. However, as many are aware the translation of Clausewitz's philosophies is open to interpretation. In *On War*, Clausewitz states that the object of combat is not solely the 'destruction' of an enemy but also the 'conquest' of an opponent.³ One can interpret 'conquest' to be defeating an opponent based on the success criteria as defined by that party. Therefore, success may not be to destroy an enemy but perhaps to disrupt or dislocate their ability to create a certain effect. Clausewitz also states that the 'aim of war is to disarm the enemy', which can be understood by the reader in both a literal and/or figurative sense.⁴ This therefore means, in this case, that the argument posed by Kalder is inappropriate. It is also argued that the principles explained in *On War* are not exclusive to state on state military conflicts but can easily be applied to state on non-state encounters.

Strachan offers an alternative viewpoint. He argues that Clausewitz is very much relevant to present

day operations and that many critics of Clausewitz have a shallow knowledge of the philosophies contained in *On War*. Strachan identifies that within *On War* the content discusses the relationship between strategy and tactics. He mentions that perhaps critics have become too focussed on the ancient tactical actions detailed in the text which could explain why some doubt its modern relevance. Strachan continues to explain that these ancient tactical actions are not there to teach the reader tactics, but rather, to set the foundations 'from which Clausewitz's ideas about war's true nature, about its inherent 'friction', about the role of chance and probability, and about the function of military genius are derived.'⁵



Title page of the original German edition *Vom Kriege* (*On War*), published in 1832.

Many are aware that Clausewitz is renowned for analysing the statement that 'War is an extension of politics and policy.'⁶ This is a simplistic statement that is not entirely accurate. One argues that the causation and intent of war is an extension of politics and policy at that time, but once war commences 'two sides clash, and their policies conflict: that reciprocity generates its own dynamic, feeding on hatred, on chance, and on the

play of military probabilities.⁷ This means that once war has commenced it will 'change and shape policy', requiring both military leaders and statesmen to be engaged and aligned with the conflict so that they can both react to changes in politics and policy as the battle progresses.⁸ This is part of the reason why Clausewitz emphasises the requirement for a quick battle as to ensure that the conflict achieves the political and/or policy intent that initiated the confrontation. In a contemporary context, this philosophy is very much relevant.

Clausewitz's philosophies are as relevant in the 21st century as they were in the 18th and 19th centuries. Perhaps one can argue that they are more relevant today due to the complexities associated with warfare. It is easy for the reader to interpret Clausewitz's philosophies in a literal sense due to the intimidating nature of the text in *On War*. However, it is assessed that Clausewitz's intent was for the reader to recognise that warfare does not necessarily follow the logic of his theory. Clausewitz acknowledged that often there is a deviation from theory when conflict occurs in reality due to 'intervening variables such as: (1) the political guidance which rationally relates ends to means in war; (2) the asymmetry of the superiority of the defence over the offence; (3) the lack of information as well as uncertainty and friction; (4) the tendency of human nature to make worst case assumptions about the enemy, and play it safe in the absence of clarity and sufficient information; (5) the fact that all military forces cannot be concentrated in space and time simultaneously; and (6) the fact that results in war are rarely final.'⁹ These variables are everlasting and are very much relevant to complex present-day military operations.

All conflicts regardless of scale and intensity has its stakeholders—leaders, fighters and non-combatants.

The other major argument in Kalder's article is that she adopts the position that Clausewitz is irrelevant in a contemporary context due to the new wars thinking. Simply put, the new wars thinking describes

how modern conflict typically is not state on state, but rather state on nonstate actors. Kalder argues that modern wars are usually fought against 'groups identified in terms of ethnicity, religion or tribe.'¹⁰ This usually results in conflicts that are not decisive, at times with strategic objectives ill-defined and on occasion 'combatants are inspired to maintain a state of conflict because it provides them with lucrative economic benefits.'¹¹ However, one must also exercise judgment and understand that it may be a 'fallacy of thinking that victory in past wars was any more decisive than today.'¹² Whilst this view from Kalder is a valid assessment, one ponders how the philosophies in Clausewitz are now no longer effective. All conflicts regardless of scale and intensity has its stakeholders—leaders, fighters and non-combatants.¹³ Each opponent regardless of whether they are a state or non-state actor will have a 'will to fight' and thus targetable critical vulnerabilities. These opponents will also have a political or policy objective that is relevant to their organisational motivations. Therefore, many of the principles outlined in *On War* are still applicable to an effective strategy against an opponent regardless of whether they are a state or non state actor. 'If one is truly going to grasp the complexity of war, then reflection of what factors are critical to understanding it, is a positive step.'¹⁴

In a similar vein to Kalder, there has been a tendency by some other strategic theorists and analysts to focus on the applicability of Clausewitz to only large scale conventional wars. These theorists view low scale conflicts, such as counter-insurgency and guerrilla warfare, as too low-intensity and 'therefore of low importance and thus not worth confronting with serious intent.'¹⁵ It is argued that even though low-scale conflicts have different politico-military strategic implications in comparison to high-intensity large scale wars, the 'complexity of different conflicts and their implications to policy making' are the same as large scale conflicts.¹⁶ Ultimately, critics arguing that Clausewitz is irrelevant to modern warfare do so, focusing on three areas: '(1) structure; (2) methods; and (3) motives.'¹⁷ In all conflicts, regardless of whether it is considered low or high intensity, it is initiated as an extension of some form of politics and/or policy 'where the act of violence is intended to fulfil our will.'¹⁸ As

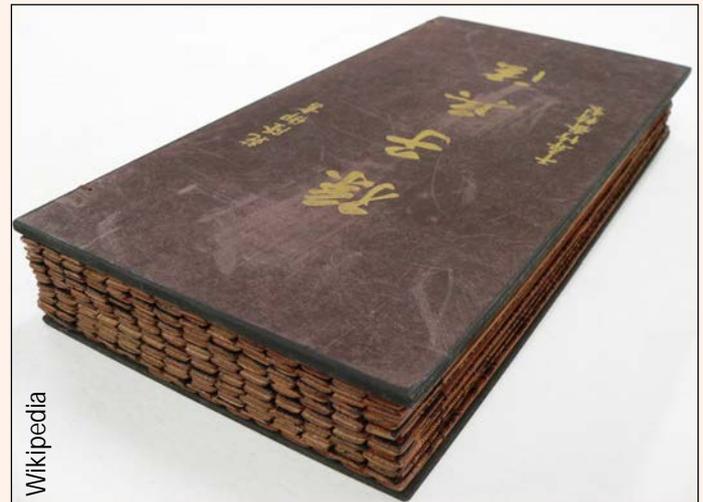
mentioned earlier, all conflicts regardless of scale and intensity, has its stakeholders—leaders, fighters and non-combatants.¹⁹ There is the capacity to adjust the Clausewitzian philosophy so that it can be applied to each alternative form of contemporary conflict. In fact, many academics argue that ‘in an age where war is increasingly complex, Clausewitz’s ideas are more rather than less powerful and, better able to capture the complexity that modern war inheres.’²⁰

It also must be briefly noted that even though the tendency at present is for state on non-state conflict, that is not to say that state on state warfare will not occur in the future. One can argue that the instability in the global strategic environment is increasing and thus inter-state relations are becoming more tenuous. This fragility could create the circumstances ripe for state on state conflict. Therefore, it is important that military leaders and statesmen continue to study the Clausewitzian philosophies.

Instability in the global strategic environment is increasing and thus inter-state relations are becoming more tenuous.

New wars thinking and low-intensity conflict are not new concepts to Clausewitz or society in general. Guerrilla warfare, counter-insurgency, and counter terrorism are all concepts that existed throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. In fact, Clausewitz lectured on guerrilla warfare in 1812.²¹ Prior to completing *On War*, Clausewitz ‘had achieved virtually clear ideas of the organisation, combat techniques, possibilities and limits, socio-political importance, and military-theoretical assessment of modern guerrilla war.’²² Regardless of the composition of warfare, large scale conventional or low scale unconventional asymmetric warfare, the principles of the trinity are the same—passion/emotion, chance and policy.²³ At a point in modern history misunderstandings developed over the interactive elements of the trinity, with many confusing the translation to be ‘the People, the Army, and the Government.’²⁴ One can understand why many modern critics of Clausewitz challenged his philosophies in a

contemporary context based significantly on a misinterpretation of the trinity. However, as mentioned, the principles of warfare are the same—‘by employing asymmetric, irregular, warfare as a mode of fighting a technological or quantitatively superior opponent, a belligerent is subject to the same strategic logic as its conventional opponents.’²⁵



‘The Art of War’ by Sun Tzu

Arguably one of the most relevant concepts that Clausewitz discusses in *On War* is the philosophy of Schwerpunkt, or what is commonly referred to as the ‘Centre of Gravity’. Precise definitions of this concept vary globally. However, holistically they all mean the same thing—it is about dislocating or disrupting an opponent’s will to fight. Clausewitz stated ‘one must keep the dominant characteristics of both belligerents in mind. Out of these characteristics, a certain Centre of Gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed.’²⁶ The United States (US) Joint Planning document defines a Centre of Gravity as a ‘source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act.’²⁷ The Australian Joint Planning document defines a Centre of Gravity as ‘the primary entity that possesses the inherent capability to achieve an objective or the desired end state.’²⁸ The philosophy of a Centre of Gravity allows planners at all levels to ascertain the critical capabilities and requirements of an opponent, ultimately to then shape their targeting strategy. Even though often this concept is challenging to accurately determine one’s Centre of Gravity, it is a valuable tool that is very much relevant to contemporary warfare at the tactical, operational and strategic levels.

It is important to note that, like most theories, Clausewitz' philosophies are not immune to the changing nature of war over time and thus their relevance in that environment. Clausewitz' theories need to be regularly reviewed and either accepted, modified, or discarded in terms of relevance for the conflict at that time. The global environment has witnessed significant modernisation since the Clausewitzian era, which has resulted in advancements in technology, civil-military relations, policy making, access to information, the importance of public opinion, the strength of weapon systems, Command, Control, Communications, Computer, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems, and economic constraints. These changes impact the interpretation and application of Clausewitzian theories, but does not make Clausewitz irrelevant. Clausewitz' philosophy is a qualitative understanding of operational art. As such, it is not designed to offer the reader a prescriptive plan but to encourage them to broadly analyse a problem utilising concepts in the text as a guide. Studying Clausewitz is a theory of practice which 'is about the how of learning to do something rather than the what of something's general nature.'²⁹

Critically analysing historical philosophies on diplomacy and military theories are essential in ensuring modern operational success.

Finally, in determining the relevance of Clausewitz's philosophies to warfare in the 21st century, it would be worthwhile to offer a simplistic comparison between those theories and another classic military theorist, Sun Tzu. Even though *The Art of War* was devised during the period 3000-4000 BC and *On War* during the 18th and 19th centuries, there are significant similarities between their methodologies. Both philosophers share strong similarities on their views of 'the primacy of politics in war, the need to maintain

professional autonomy of the military in action, the overall importance of numerical superiority and the desirability of securing victory as quickly and decisively as possible once war has become inevitable.'³⁰ Differences appeared in the 'use of intelligence, the utility of deception, the feasibility of the surprise attack and the possibility of reliably forecasting and controlling events on the battlefield.'³¹ Importantly, one should also note that the significant dissimilarities in terms of geography, time and culture when these two publications were written. Noting that Sun Tzu is a preferred military philosopher by many eastern hemispherical states (even in a contemporary context) one argues that there is merit in scrutinising classical theories for a contemporary application.

CONCLUSION

Modern warfare is incredibly complex and often complicated, arguably more so than it has been throughout history, with a plethora of stakeholders. However, whilst contemporary conflict is complex, the principles of war are still the same. Critically analysing historical philosophies on diplomacy and military theories are essential in ensuring modern operational success. This essay has compared, contrasted and critically assessed the competing views of Clausewitz's applicability to modern warfare and whether there is value in military leaders studying his philosophies. The critical element to applying Clausewitz to contemporary warfare is not to use *On War* as a how to guide, but more to reference this piece during conflicts to determine what Clausewitz offers on the topic. The reader then determines whether that information is relevant and if so, should cross reference with other concepts in order to generate their own course of action. 'What makes Clausewitzian theory so challenging even today is that while his conceptual framework is fundamentally so simple, it nevertheless requires considerable hard thinking and deciphering to comprehend.'³² It is the view of this essay that Clausewitz is very much relevant to the 21st Century and that it is crucial for military strategists and leaders to study these concepts in order to ensure success in all contemporary operations.

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