

# Is Clausewitz or Sun Tzu More Relevant to Contemporary War?

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## Is Clausewitz or Sun Tzu More Relevant to Contemporary War?

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Sun Tzu and Clausewitz are both acknowledged to be the most influential writers on the topic of war and strategy. Despite the fact that Clausewitz wrote around 200 years ago (Howard, 2002, p.8) and Sun Tzu more than 2000 years ago (Kane, 2007, p.30), their thoughts remain relevant. This essay will explore to what extent the thoughts of Sun Tzu and Clausewitz can be used in order to understand contemporary war.

The first part of this paper will introduce Clausewitz's very systematic approach to the subject of war and will prove how useful it remains for formulating a definition of war that is able to conceptualize the many different forms of contemporary war. To achieve this task, Clausewitz's definition of war as a chameleon, the wondrous trinity, and the concept of war as an extended duel will be explained and applied to different phenomena in contemporary war. Apart from that, Clausewitz's tactical thought on defence and offence can help to explain why powerful states are not always able to win "small wars".

The second part will use Sun Tzu's definition of war and evaluate its relevance to contemporary war. The main observation will be that differences between Sun Tzu and Clausewitz stem from the use of a broader level of analysis by Sun Tzu, which corresponds better to the strategic dynamics of contemporary war. Separately, Sun Tzu's emphasis on the importance of information, which runs throughout *The Art of War*, can be useful in understanding why powerful states do not always win small wars, but does not prove very useful in conceptualizing the many different forms of contemporary war.

### War is More Than a Chameleon

In recent years, Clausewitzian thought has often been dismissed as being out of date, because Clausewitz' focus on state actors as the main participants in wars does not correspond to contemporary developments. This has been the main critique made by Mary Kaldor, who argues that, due to the fact that sub-state actors (war-lords, drug-traffickers, terrorists) are now the main influence in what Kaldor describes as "New Wars", Clausewitz' alleged definition of war as a tool for states to achieve political goals does not correspond to the changing nature of war (Kaldor, 2003, p.15). Another prominent critic has been Martin van Creveld, who states that the dominance of low-intensity conflicts has made Clausewitz' thought irrelevant. (Creveld, 2004, p.88) However, these critiques have often chosen a very simplistic definition of Clausewitzian war. (Daase in Strachan, 2007, p.182) By defining war as more than a chameleon (Clausewitz, 2007, p.30), Clausewitz acknowledges that the appearance of war always changes according to the surrounding circumstances. "According to Clausewitz, an essentialist definition of war is not possible. War must be defined in relation to political, economic and cultural conditions" (Münkler, 2007, p.4). Depending on the actors involved and the goals pursued, the type of violence applied will vary (Ruloff, 2007, p.10-11). However, as mentioned above, Clausewitz defines war as being more than a chameleon, which simply changes its appearance as its environment changes. This indicates that Clausewitz did support the argument that even war's common internal tendencies (which he describes as a wondrous trinity) can vary in proportion. This becomes extremely clear when looking at Clausewitz' definition of war:

"War is not only a true chameleon, because it changes its nature slightly in each concrete case, but it is also, in its

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overall appearance, in relation to its inherent tendencies, a wondrous trinity" (Clausewitz, 2007, p.30).

## Clausewitz' Trinity

The Clausewitzian trinity is composed of

"primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; the play of chance and probability, within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to pure reason." (Clausewitz, 2007, p.30)

Clausewitz continues with: "The first of these three aspects concerns more the people; the second, more the commander and his army; the third, more the government" (Clausewitz, 2007, p.30). The essence of the Clausewitzian trinity comes from the fact that the relationship of these three elements is always shifting and unstable (Bassford in Strachan, 2007, p.81). This is why Clausewitz calls it a wondrous trinity. Clausewitz writes, "the task ... is to keep our theory floating among these three tendencies" (Bassford in Strachan, 2007, p. 81). The word "floating" clearly entails dynamism. Apart from that, the three elements also correspond dynamically to the population, military, and government (hence more the people, not only the people).

Clausewitz views the first element of his trinity, violence, not only as physical violence, but violence as an emotion in order to motivate the initiation of war (Bassford in Strachan, p.82). After the decision to engage in war has been taken, the second element, the play of chance and probability, constructs the analytical framework of the tactical conduct of war. The play of chance comes from the physical world (mountains, roads, vehicles, weapons, demographics, technology, and economics etc.) and of the personalities, capabilities, hopes, dreams, plans, and wills of the actors involved in the conflict, in which the actor's plans and actions will co-evolve (Bassford in Strachan, 2007, p.89). Hence, the second element is supposed to represent the concrete and complex empirical reality of war. The third element is war as an instrument of policy and therefore a continuation of politics. This third element of the Clausewitzian trinity, in particular, has often been criticized as being out of date, since it cannot be applied to wars with economic objectives (Strachan, 2007, p.9). However, this simply depends on how you define politics. If one applies a narrow definition of politics as statecraft, than obviously Clausewitz would be unsuitable for conceptualizing wars involving non-state actors. However, this would be a mistake. Politics should rather be defined as a "highly variable process by which power is distributed in any society" (Bassford in Strachan, 2007, p.84), thereby including state and non-state actors. This might not correspond to Clausewitz's horizon of political experience, but that can be attributed to the circumstances of his time where politics was simply equated with statecraft.

With this floating trinity, Clausewitz constructs a concept of war that reflects the inherent unpredictability and complexity of war, and which can also be used to analyze contemporary war. All in all, the nature of war, despite the changes with regard to actors and objectives, can still be adequately conceptualized using Clausewitz's trinitarian approach.

## War as an Extended Duel

However, not only is Clausewitz' trinity useful for framing the complexity of war; Clausewitz introduces a scheme that helps us reduce the complexity of war, by defining it as an extended duel. He defines the purpose of this duel as "to compel our enemy to do our will" (Clausewitz, 2007, p.13). This scheme reduces the complexity of war to war "as the application of violent means to realize military aims to achieve political ends" (Daase in Strachan, 2007, p.186). This tripartite, combined with the "extended duel" concept, leads to a conceptual scheme of violent conflict that contains 5 elements: "the attacker, the defender, violent means, military aims, and political ends" (Daase in Strachan, 2007, p.185). Using this scheme, all forms of political violence, such as conventional interstate wars, as well as new war phenomena, such as guerrilla warfare, the military logic of mass-rape occurring in civil wars (Münkler, 2010, p.146), or terrorism, can be described. Terrorism, for example, be conceptualized using this scheme, as a non-state actor (attacker) using unexpected attacks aimed specifically against civilians (means) in order to spread fear within the population (military aim) to urge a state government (defender) to alter its policy (political ends). A perfectly fitting example would be the terrorist bomb attacks, carried out in Spain, in 2004, in order to influence the elections and

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bring about a change in government, which resulted in the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq.

## **Bekenntnisschrift: Why Powerful States Lose “Small Wars”**

Clausewitz' thoughts in the Bekenntnisschrift (a document where Clausewitz calls for a patriotic guerrilla war against the occupying French troops) can help to understand the difference between conventional “big” interstate wars and “small wars” fought between powerful states and allegedly less powerful non-state actors (Daase in Strachan, 2007, p.193). In conventional wars, the actors try to fight strategically in the offence and tactically in the defense. In small wars, the non-state actors intend the opposite. Since they are militarily too weak to attack the enemy in their own lands, they resort to a defensive strategy, while tactically fighting in the offense (Daase in Strachan, 2007, p.190). Clausewitz writes,

“Within the theatre of war which we have decided to defend, we can attack the enemy where and how it pleases us. There we have all the means completely to destroy the enemy army, just as in any offence. Indeed, in our own theatre of war, this is much easier for us than for our enemy” (Daase in Strachan, 2007, p.189).

This idea of “active defense” corresponds perfectly to the rationale of contemporary guerrilla warfare.

An additional element introduced by Clausewitz, which helps to explain why powerful states lose “small wars”, is that a war fought on one's own ground is more easily sustained (Clausewitz, 2007, p.284). Apart from that, Clausewitz points out

“national sentiments, crucial in regard to motivation, arise more easily, and are more durable, for the purpose of national self-preservation and defense than for the purpose of conquest and offensive measures” (Daase in Strachan, 2007, p.193).

This thought also corresponds to the first element of the Clausewitzian trinity.

In general, the misconception that Clausewitz' thought only corresponds to wars between state actors has been proven wrong. His clear schemes and concepts enable an understanding of conventional and unconventional warfare. His writings on defense and offence, combined with his thoughts expressed in the Bekenntnisschrift, give additional clues as to why states might confront difficulties in successfully fighting asymmetrical wars. Therefore, Clausewitzian thought remains very relevant to understanding contemporary war (Duyvesteyn, 2005, p.220).

## **Sun Tzu: War is Like Water**

When searching for a detailed definition of the nature of war in Sun Tzu's The Art of War, one does not receive an answer as easily as in Clausewitz' On War. However, the two thinkers do, despite the huge gaps in culture, time, and their methodological approaches to the subject, reach similar conclusions. The title, The Art of War, suggests that Sun Tzu recognizes that war is partially subject to chance and friction; therefore, Sun Tzu also emphasizes the importance of the intuition of the military leader to adapt to unforeseen circumstances (Handel, 2005, p.22). Apart from that, Sun Tzu's recognition of the changing nature of war is reflected in the following quote: “And as water has no constant form, there are in war no constant conditions” (Sun Tzu, 1986, p.22). This statement is combined with several poetic metaphors to highlight the complexity of war:

“The musical notes are only five in number but their melodies are so numerous that one cannot hear them all. The primary colors are only five in number but their combinations are so infinite that one cannot visualize them all. The flavors are only five in number but their blends are so various that one cannot taste them all. In battle there are only the normal and extraordinary forces, but their combinations are limitless; none can comprehend them all. For these two forces are mutually reproductive; their interaction as endless as that of interlocked rings. Who can determine where one ends and the other begins?” (Sun Tzu, 1986, p.17)

This quote clearly shows that Sun Tzu, just like Clausewitz, acknowledges the inherent complexity of war. For Sun

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Tzu, the complexity in conflict stems from the interaction with the opponent and is therefore similar to Clausewitz's second Trinitarian element, which states that the complexity of war is grounded in the physical conditions in which the strategies and tactics of the opponents co-evolve:

"That which depends on me, I can do; that which depends on the enemy cannot be certain. Therefore it is said that one may know how to win, but cannot necessarily do so" (Sun Tzu, 1986, p.15).

By highlighting the unpredictability of war, Sun Tzu constructs a system of chaos, in the modern scientific sense, which corresponds to the complexity of contemporary war, and which is also reflected in Clausewitz' concept of war.

One apparent difference between the two thinkers is that Clausewitz tends to focus more on the "lower" tactical levels of war, while Sun Tzu also incorporates the "higher" strategic levels of war into his theory (Handel, 2005, p.24). The main differences between Clausewitz and Sun Tzu are therefore not grounded in definitions, but in their levels of analysis. Another difference between Clausewitz and Sun Tzu is their evaluation of information and deception. While Sun Tzu thought of it as the most important element in war, making it the most dominant theme running throughout *The Art of War*, Clausewitz, despite realizing its tactical utility, did not consider it to be of central importance, and dismissed the relevance of achieving deception or surprise on a strategic level (Handel, 2005, p.168-172). These two differences will now be introduced and their relevance for understanding contemporary war will be scrutinized.

## Level of Analysis

The framework of *The Art of War* is much broader than that of *On War*. Clausewitz is mainly concerned with the art of waging war (however, Clausewitz does not think that diplomacy is unimportant, only that war begins when diplomacy has failed, therefore he uses a different level of analysis than Sun Tzu), while Sun Tzu devotes attention to strategies preceding the actual fighting, ranging from military preparations to diplomatic actions (Handel, 2005, p.24). For Sun Tzu, strategic superiority will result in tactical success (Sun Tzu, 1986, p.12). On the other hand, Clausewitz creates an artificial line between political, economical and logistic preparations and the conduct of battle. This is rather unfortunate, since a strong diplomatic strategy and a well-functioning economy, points emphasized by Sun Tzu, are of course of central importance in winning a war. This is especially true nowadays, where scientific advancements and technological innovations, as well as the production and distribution of aliment, fuel, and weapons, are just as important as tactical battlefield success for winning a war (Handel, 2005, p.28). Regarding this more comprehensive level of analysis, the thinking of Sun Tzu is indeed more relevant to contemporary war than that of Clausewitz.

Another major difference derived from Sun Tzu's emphasis on strategic preparations is the idea of achieving numeric superiority, in contrast to Clausewitz' accentuation of the tactical level and the corresponding theory of forming a center of gravity (Handel, 2005, p.40). Sun Tzu believes that one crucial ingredient to winning a war is to be superior in numbers (Sun Tzu, 1986, p.22). Clausewitz obviously agrees that the possibility of winning a battle would increase with superiority in numbers; however, he believed that one could also win a battle by creating local numeric superiority (Clausewitz, 2007, p.243).

Sun Tzu's numeric superiority thinking was extremely apparent in China's strategy during the Korean War (1950-53), where tactical success was supposed to be generated by simply outnumbering the US-led UN troops (Freedmann, 2001, p.43). In addition, this type of strategy characterized the post-World War II strategy of the USSR. The Soviets drastically outnumbered NATO troops in regard to conventional war machinery. This situation influenced President Eisenhower's decision to "abandon the attempt to compete in conventional strength and capitalize instead on the growing nuclear arsenal of the United States" (Freedmann, 2001, p.48). It is evident that Sun Tzu's thoughts can help to explain some of the strategic military constellations of the modern age.

## Sun Tzu and Intelligence

Throughout *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu emphasizes the importance of information. According to Sun Tzu, all warfare, on the strategic and the tactical level, is based on deception and surprise, and therefore on intelligence (Sun Tzu,

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1986, p.9). Sun Tzu argues that continuous use of information about the enemy's strategy (political goal, possible alliances etc.) and tactical capacities (number and types of troops, war machinery, resources etc.) is the only effective way to exploit the enemy's weaknesses, and should therefore form the basis for all military planning (Sun Tzu, 1986). Critics have argued that Sun Tzu relies excessively on intelligence, thereby making surprise and deception a panacea (Handel, 2005, p.194). Additionally, it may be asked whether Sun Tzu's belief that reliable information is obtainable and can enable accurate forecasts (Handel, 2005, p.193) contradicts his idea of the infinite possible developments of war, which was outlined above. However, the importance of intelligence in contemporary war should not be dismissed on these grounds. Intelligence, surprise and deception do play an important role in modern warfare. During the Persian Gulf War, for example, Saddam Hussein's loss of air reconnaissance allowed the US and its allies to successfully conduct deception tactics, which, in addition to the overall supremacy of the US Army, played a role in the swift defeat of the Iranian military forces (Finlan, 2003, p.33).

Another insight provided by Sun Tzu's thought on intelligence in regard to understanding contemporary war is more vague and indirect. Sun Tzu was aware of the fact that intelligence and information accumulation was a highly complex and difficult task. The chapter on the Use of Spies, where Sun Tzu writes about deception, counter-deception and the counter-measures corresponding to counter-deception, clearly reflects this complexity. When one takes into account Sun Tzu's empirical world, his thoughts on the complexity of information gathering can be seen in a more insightful light. Sun Tzu's political world consisted of mainly two actors: Emperors of Chinese states, and barbarian rulers (Kane, 2007, p.30). The chapter on tactics indicates that the vast majority of direct military confrontation took place on the battlefield (Sun Tzu, 1986, p.15). This is in contrast to the complexity of contemporary conflicts. Conflicts today often include a great variety of actors, all with different kinds of motives and strategies (states, warlords, terrorists, security firms, criminal organizations etc.), as well as different kinds of warfare (conventional tactics, guerilla warfare, terrorist attacks etc.). Thus one must assume that the realization of adequate information is very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Therefore, Sun Tzu's idea of complexity of information can help to explain why strong states misjudge certain situations and underestimate the political and military capacities of non-state actors, consequently applying inept strategies, which cause them to lose asymmetrical conflicts.

## Conclusion: Both Thinkers Remain Relevant

This essay has shown that both Clausewitz and Sun Tzu remain relevant to understanding contemporary conflicts. Clausewitz' writings on offence and defense, combined with the ideas expressed in his *Bekenntnisschrift*, offer analytical insight into modern-day guerilla warfare. One slight weakness of Clausewitzian thinking is the overemphasis of the tactical and the negligence of the strategic levels of war. With regard to this point, Sun Tzu's broader approach to war corresponds to the continuing relevance of the strategic dimensions of war. Apart from that, Sun Tzu's thoughts on intelligence are useful for accounting for the difficulties states face when engaging in asymmetrical wars. However, Sun Tzu does not offer many possibilities for conceptualizing wars. This is the strength of Clausewitz' very analytical thinking in regard to war. Clausewitz' seemingly timeless and universal definition of war as more than a chameleon, combined with his "floating" trinity concept, help to explain the dynamics of all types of contemporary wars. As a result, Clausewitz manages to transcend the limitations of his horizon of experience, imposed by the political and technological circumstances of his time (Howard, 2002, p.1). Additionally, his scheme of war as an extended duel is very useful in conceptualizing the different forms of today's political violence. Sun Tzu does not offer these conceptualizing tools, which makes Clausewitz' *On War* more useful for understanding and outlining the nature of contemporary war.

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