The Application of Force and Strategy in Sun Tzu and Clausewitz

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Whilst separated by great distances in time, geography and culture, both Sun Tzu and Carl von Clausewitz can be seen to have developed a rather similar outlook on strategy and the application of force.[1] Clausewitz's and Sun Tzu's apparent congruence via the paradoxical trinity will be used as a springboard to identify what most separates the two strategists. Indeed, "the Clausewitzian trinity remains indispensable, as it provides us with the conceptual framework for examining Sun Tzu's scheme. Without it, we would find it hard to understand the real value and implications behind Sun Tzu's conclusions".[2] Whilst the two strategists' visions are largely similar, there are differences. There are three differences elaborated upon here: Sun Tzu's obvious *preference* and elaboration on a bloodless victory, the absence of friction with Sun Tzu, and Clausewitz's neglect of intelligence. After studying these differences, we can come to the realisation that Clausewitz has the more persuasive vision, due largely to his concept of friction and unforeseen events in war. However this does not mean Sun Tzu is to be neglected.

Clausewitz introduces us to his 'trinitarian analysis', a lens through which we can analyse wars via three certain tendencies. Handel's argument that Sun Tzu easily accommodates the paradoxical trinity is difficult to refute. Indeed, by merely reading *The Art of War* and understanding the constituent parts of Clausewitz's trinity, the conclusion is irresistible that both are complementary, even before reading Handel's analysis.[3] Clausewitz's trinity is consists of three tendencies that make up states in a war. People, chance and government comprise the 'codes of law, deep-rooted in their subject and yet variable in their relationship to one another', that are present in war.[4] These three tendencies are prevalent, albeit sporadically, throughout *The Art of War*.

Clausewitz's insistence that the civilian government should retain control of the armed forces is very obvious, and 'armed forces do not exist for their own sake'.[5] Sun Tzu refers to generals as assistants to the nation, and they receive orders to prepare for war from the civilian government.[6] Conversely, the two also warn against civilian meddling in military operations.[7] This reflects Clausewitz's belief that wars are political in nature,[8] and the same is implied with Sun Tzu as the political decision to go to war is derived from civilian government, then the order given to the military.

As for what Clausewitz calls chance, the spirit and military genius can roam within it.[9] One interprets this as the ability of that commander or general to take advantage of the unforeseeable events of war, and the ability to apply (the correct) theories and rules to their fullest capacity.[10] Similarly, Sun Tzu alludes to the qualities of a good general, such as intellect and the ability to adapt advantageously.[11]

Finally, in regards to the people, Clausewitz describes them as the source of passion and raw violence,[12] whereas Sun Tzu refers to the people as the source of one's support, when there is mutual love between the ruled and its rulers. The people would fight and die for their leaders were they to be edified and 'the Way' (i.e. the public support and trust of the government) cultivated.[13] Now that the three tendencies are briefly explained, we can fully see how Sun Tzu's and Clausewitz's core precepts of strategy, and therefore the application of force, are along parallel lines, if not on the same ones. This must be remembered as we look at what divides the two strategists.

A point of divergence between Sun Tzu and Clausewitz emerges when one considers how strategic factors beyond

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Clausewitz's 'narrow'[14] definition of war affects the war effort. Clausewitz is primarily concerned with strategic application of force and planning when one is actually in a state of war. Whilst both men at varying degrees and places discuss the importance of attacking alliances or forming ones, Sun Tzu alone stresses the importance of attacking the enemy before hostilities begin. By this, it is meant that one must attack a known enemy whilst he is laying his plans. This is Sun Tzu's first strategic priority, followed by attacking the enemy's alliance system and, third priority to attack the enemy's armed forces.[15] Clausewitz's theory is more concerned with the phenomena when open hostilities occur, therefore his priorities are not immediately the same as Sun Tzu. As Colin Gray attests, this preoccupation with the pure military sphere, a lack of grand strategic sense, is not healthy, particularly for Germany in the two world wars.[16]

Here we can draw another point of divergence: Sun Tzu's preference for a bloodless victory and Clausewitz's rejection of it, and placing the destruction of the enemy as the first priority. Sun Tzu clearly states that one's aim "must be to take All-under-Heaven intact. Thus your troops are not worn out and your gains will be complete. This is the art of offensive strategy."[17] Whilst achieving one's objective without exerting force or losing the strength of the armed forces is desirable, Sun Tzu never mentions whether this is likely or unlikely, easy or difficult. However this scenario is what should be aimed for – blood should not be shed when it need not be. Contrary to this, Clausewitz does not bother with such 'fallacies':

"Kind-hearted people might of course think there was some ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed, and might imagine this is the true goal of the art of war. Pleasant as it sounds, it is a fallacy that must be exposed: war is such a dangerous business that the mistakes which come from kindness are the very worst."[18]

""We are not interested in generals who win victories without bloodshed. The fact that slaughter is a horrifying spectacle must make us take war more seriously, but not provide an excuse for gradually blunting our swords in the name of humanity. Sooner or later someone will come along with a sharp sword and hack off our arms."[19]

This logically leads us to understand why Clausewitz considers the destruction of the enemy armed forces as the first priority. After destroying the armed forces, one can subdue the enemy lands then bring the enemy to the peace table.[20] To be fair to Sun Tzu, much of his work is about the physical and violent part of war, combat, and how to win by fighting.[21] The last two points about a 'grander' strategic vision besides the military sphere with Sun Tzu and his insistence on planning (and indeed attacking) before hostilities begin can lead us to interpret part of *The Art of War* as a preamble to *On War*. This can be due to Clausewitz's preoccupation with strategy *during* conflict.

Uncertainty is perhaps what makes Clausewitz slightly more all-encompassing as a general guide to 'normal' principles in war. By 'normal', Julian Corbett makes the analogy of a seaman knowing the usual conditions in a storm, which inevitably helps in sailing through the most peculiar and unique of storms.[22] This analogy is particularly useful, as one can easily understand how wars can operate and certain general tendencies of war are present in most to varying degrees. By dealing with uncertainty, and consequently friction, Clausewitz allows for one inevitability of war and strategy that Sun Tzu does not allude to enough – things going wrong. Sun Tzu does state that war is of a varying nature and that orthodox and unorthodox attacks are endlessly varying in nature.[23] Whilst most of Sun Tzu is understood whilst reading between the lines, there is not enough implicit mention of the uncertainties of war. Whilst one may know about oneself and the enemy,[24] you may yet be imperilled in war due to unforeseen events, and what Clausewitz explicitly labels 'friction'. Clausewitz certainly does stand apart on his persuasiveness on the subject of how and why things can go very wrong.[25]

Clausewitz's notion of friction is what is generally absent from *The Art of War*. Friction is what makes the easy difficult, what makes plans go astray, and friction is always in contact when there is chance involved.[26] Clausewitz cautions the reader to be aware that war is indeed a gamble,[27] and that no matter how one can plan, uncertainty and chance will place the forces of friction upon one's plans. Conversely, Sun Tzu has little to no reference (implicit or explicit) in expecting, or allowing for, the failure (or only partial success) of one's plans, no matter how rationally calculated. One caveat however, is the reference to waning public support for war in a protracted conflict – one does not 'raise troops twice'![28] Whilst this is friction of a sort, it is not helpful when considering a shorter conflict and how

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friction is present in strategy and military field operations.

To reel this back to the trinity, we can see how Sun Tzu is undermined when delving deeper into the second tendency. Whilst he does concentrate enough on the abilities needed in a general, the uncertainty and friction of war and strategy is neglected. It could be that Handel, in this respect, passes over this omission from Sun Tzu when he says "[Sun Tzu] pays close attention to the second dimension, which includes the role of the military in all technical details".[29] As aforementioned, while both strategists demand generals to be able to act spontaneously to seize unforeseen advantages, Sun Tzu does not mention the converse. Clausewitz's warning that easy objectives may not turn out to be easy at all highlights an absence of a similar warning from Sun Tzu, even when reading extensively between the poetic and cryptic lines. However it must be remembered that friction affects the whole trinity, but it has great potential effect if one considers the (in)ability of a general or commander to compensate for it on the battlefield. Derek Yuan insists that Sun Tzu's second tendency is not limited by friction, because he did not set out to create the 'trinity' in the first place, therefore he is not bound by the need for a 'genius' to overcome it.[30] Yuan believes that Sun Tzu can be excused for this because of his rational assumptions on war. But surely, in the realm of mere common sense, we cannot assume everything to go according to plan. If we wish to apply Sun Tzu to the real world, we cannot ignore the looming possibility of errors of any kind. This is where Clausewitz takes over from Sun Tzu as the more complete theorist of war.

Sun Tzu, however, does have more emphasis on one crucial aspect of war that Clausewitz tends to neglect: intelligence and net assessments of the enemy. Whilst Sun Tzu discusses intelligence on all levels, Clausewitz mostly discusses it on the operational and tactical levels, and negatively portrays it.[31] Clausewitz does make a short reference to strategic net assessment of the enemy, but, as in the same way Sun Tzu does not refer to friction and uncertainty fully, Clausewitz does not refer to strategic intelligence fully. Handel does describe Sun Tzu's net assessment as an ideal, it is however worth undertaking such intelligence tasks.[32] Whilst indeed not perfect in the real world, knowing the general capabilities of the enemy and of yourself should help in the planning of grand strategy (beyond military means and therefore beyond Clausewitz). An example here could be how inter-war British industrial intelligence managed to anticipate a knock-out attempt by Nazi Germany and a British survival, which would later on bring latent economic strength to bear against the Third Reich.[33] This highlights the kind of intelligence where a statesman would be better off leaning towards Sun Tzu than Clausewitz, lest he or she cast information off as being too unreliable. The operational and tactical level analysis of intelligence is a major divergence between the two, but the usefulness of this kind of intelligence depends on the relationship of technology, information and mobility, as Handel alludes to.[34] The strategic intelligence net assessment is more applicable across the ages, and which is why it is considered the more important facet for this discussion.

Conversely, Handel, once again, correctly identifies that if one were too reliant "on Sun Tzu's counsel… [it would] impel a commander to overrate the value of intelligence and surprise on all levels, as well as to consider deception a panacea."[35] This leads us however back to where we can use Sun Tzu and Clausewitz in conjunction. If a commander with 'genius' could understand when to apply Sun Tzu's wisdom on intelligence, and Clausewitz's pinch (or shovel-load, rather) of salt on this issue, then one could strike an appropriate balance. Handel alludes to this when we look at table 15.1, where he portrays Jomini somewhat as a happy medium in intelligence application.[36]

The failure of Sun Tzu, or at least of scholarly discussion, to account for *The Art of War*'s absence of friction adequately, will preserve friction and uncertainty in war as one of the main differences between Clausewitz and Sun Tzu. Quoting Boyd, Yuan postulates that "Sun Tzu tried to drive his adversary bananas while Clausewitz tried to keep himself from being driven bananas"[37]. One could retort that whilst Sun Tzu tried to drive his adversary bananas, Clausewitz and his genius would have hacked off Sun Tzu's arms.

Nonetheless, as explained above, they are largely similar in most aspects, and Handel is, interpretatively, **mostly** correct. However, as the differences are few, we can possibly merge the two, and consider Sun Tzu's first two priorities as a preamble to Clausewitz's. Before Clausewitz would undertake a war, we should consult Sun Tzu and determine and frustrate the enemy's plans (if possible, whilst they are being laid), then to isolate the enemy, and finally attack the enemy. We can understand Sun Tzu as the thinker who would rather maintain war as a mind game, or a question of intelligence and political meddling, rather than letting it turn into a bloodbath.[38] We can see

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Clausewitz as the man who would seek to overcome friction through intuition, once Sun Tzu's political meddling had led to open hostilities in war. During a war, however, Sun Tzu would yet complement Clausewitz due to the former's fondness for continued use of intelligence, particularly in the strategic sense and in the modern age.

To end on a convergence, the trinity *mostly* remains intact with Sun Tzu. Both strategists can fit within each other's thoughts on war, but with disagreements. These disagreements were Sun Tzu's *preference for and greater faith in* a bloodless victory, the concept of friction, and strategic intelligence. The disagreements can be categorised differently. The first is purely theoretical, and does not need to be a huge dividing factor because Sun Tzu never stresses the likelihood of peaceful victories, and his book demonstrates that he was not naïve about physical, violent, conflict. The second two points of difference are similar in that one does not discuss the other enough – Sun Tzu does not discuss friction enough, and Clausewitz does not discuss strategic intelligence enough. With so many similarities between these two giants, the answer as to which is the more persuasive about strategy and the use of force, boils down to this conclusion: whilst both are mutually complementary, Clausewitz has the better *overall* work on strategy. This is due to his concept of friction and related genius. The lack of Clausewitz's strategic intelligence is not as big a flaw as Sun Tzu's lack of friction. Yuan's argument that Sun Tzu's reliance on intelligence makes up for friction is not sufficient. However, one would do well to read both *On War* and *The Art of War* before becoming a statesman, as one cannot be recommended before the other, the two being mostly mutually complementary when understood in depth.

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[2] Yuen, D.M.C. 'Deciphering Sun Tzu', *Comparative Strategy* (2008, Vol. 27) pp. 184

[3] Handel, *Masters of War…* pp. 102-104, 119-120

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[7] Ibid., pp. 49-50, 110, and see also: Paret, 'Clausewitz' in *Makers of Modern Strategy…* pp. 200

[8] Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 87-88

[9] Ibid., pp. 89, 111

[10] Rogers, C.J. 'Clausewitz, Genius, and the Rules', *Journal of Military History* (2002, Vol. 66:4) pp. 1174-1176

[11] Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, pp. 6-7

[12] Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 89

[13] Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, pp. 4, 28-29, 131

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[18] Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 75

[19] Ibid., pp. 260. Used from quotation in Handel, *Masters of War…*, pp. 149

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[25] Gray, *Modern Strategy*, pp. 94

[26] Clausewtiz, *On War*, pp. 119-121

[27] Ibid., pp. 85

[28] Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, pp. 23-24

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[35] Ibid., pp. 300

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[37] Yuan, 'Deciphering Sun Tzu', pp. 191

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