

How Far Can Clausewitzian Concepts Be Applied To The Nuclear Age?

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PATRICK HOPPER, JUN 21 2012

When considering the question 'How far can Clausewitzian concepts be applied to the nuclear age?' it can be said that the existing literature on the issue is susceptible to arguing one way or the other, that it is applicable, or that it is not. This essay will not take that approach, instead it will highlight the key Clausewitzian concepts that it deems as applicable to the nuclear age, and the concepts it views as being unable to fit into such a framework. It is important before continuing to note that this essay offers one opinion of many on this topic, there is no universally accepted answer to this question. The commonly quoted Clausewitzian concept of 'war as a continuation of politics' will be discussed and it will be argued that, through the means of defence or deterrence, it can be applied to the nuclear age. The argument that war cannot be a continuation of political aims in the nuclear age due the self-destructive nature of nuclear strategy will be examined. The Clausewitzian notion of a sense of subjectivity prevailing among the ages will be analysed in relation to the nuclear age. It will be argued that it is impossible to carry over this notion to particular circumstances in the nuclear age. The imbalance of the 'trinity of war' in the nuclear age and the notion that war cannot be a singular decisive blow will be referred to as a way in which Clausewitzian concepts do not apply to the nuclear age.

When examining the core structure of Clausewitz concepts, it is important to mention his proclamation that war is a continuation of politics by other means. "The political object – the original motive for the war – will determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires" (Howard and Paret 1976). Clausewitz states in his planned (but never implemented) revisions of *On War*, the importance of keeping the political factor in mind whilst reading his work (Howard and Paret 1976). However, there are criticisms amongst academics of the notion that war is a continuation of politics by other means when attempting to apply Clausewitz to the nuclear age. The destructive capability of nuclear weapons, and the potential of a singular attack to wipe out entire cities and large sections of the population places a strain on the Clausewitzian concept of policy, having a continuous influence over military strategy (Shephard 1990). The next paragraph will determine why this is the case.

The invention of nuclear weapons and their subsequent introduction as a means of warfare has caused some writers on the topic of war to suggest that this has led to the realisation of Clausewitz's theoretical concept of 'absolute war'. Clausewitz proposed that there are two forms of war: war in the abstract (absolute war), and 'real war'. The concepts of Clausewitz state that absolute war is the logical ideal of war. It is a state of 'total discharge' and occurs when "two mutually destructive elements collide" (Rosenberg 1994: 161). Absolute war is also seen as a result of reciprocity between the two warring sides and does not end until one side destroys the other; the scale of the conflict is unlimited (Howard and Paret 1976).

Clausewitz goes on to suggest that 'real war' is not one of mutually destructive elements colliding, but of a discontinuous nature due to a "vast array of factors, forces and conditions in national affairs that are affected by war" (Howard and Paret 1976). The availability of nuclear weapons is said to have made the theoretical concept of 'absolute war' a reality. The possibility of an 'absolute war' and the potential destruction of the world as we know it, justifies certain questions being asked of Clausewitzian concepts applicability to the nuclear age. The situation in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviets, in which both sides were armed with nuclear weapons, threatened to become what Clausewitz defines as 'absolute war' from the offset as an attack from either side would

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result in retaliation, thus leading to the ultimate escalation.

The question asked here is “whether it is possible to pursue political ends with nuclear means?” The wide range of opinion suggests that it is not possible when both sides have nuclear capabilities. The situation during the Cold War illustrates this point in that the United States could not launch an attack of unlimited means on the Soviets, knowing that a counter would likely have unlimited consequences for themselves (Freedman 1986). Additionally, it has been pointed out by critics of Clausewitzian relevance in the nuclear age, such as Shephard (1990), that the potential speed of delivery of a nuclear weapon and consequential devastation it would cause, renders the postulation that ‘war always lasts long enough to remain subject to a superior intelligence’ (for political ends to direct military means) as unstable. For instance, a commencement of nuclear war between two super powers would most likely be suicide for both sides (Jervis 1984), and thus there is an argument that there would not be sufficient time for a political response to take effect (Echevarria 1995). However, this essay will argue that the key Clausewitzian concept of war being a continuation of politics by other means is applicable to the nuclear age.

This essay agrees with Brodie (1976) when he suggests that with regards to battling nations who possess nuclear weapons, the character of war has transformed beyond recognition. However, using the Cold War as an example, it is suggested that although the use of nuclear weapons never prevailed, and that no battles as such took place, the continuation of politik, as Clausewitz phrased it (Howard and Paret 1976), can be seen as a relevance in Clausewitzian concepts; in the form of deterrence (Barr 1991). The political objective between two nuclear aided sides is the avoidance of war and protection of national security. It has been argued that this inactivity and defence shown in the Cold era can be applied to Clausewitzian concepts as his work consists of the agreement that there are long period of inactivity in war (Barr 1991). The strategy of defence, or in this case deterrence, can be deemed as a notion which is in line with Clausewitz in the opinion that defence, as opposed to offense, is the stronger form of war. Furthermore, following Clausewitzian principles, the period of inactivity in war is a “viable option which can be held until a political objective is reached (Brodie 1976).

Additionally, according to Clausewitz, the disarmament of the enemy is the ultimate goal (Clausewitz 1976). With the inactivity and defence (deterrence) evident in the Cold War era of the nuclear age, it has been argued that the Clausewitzian concept of war as a ‘continuation of policy by other means’ is still evident in stand offs between nuclear powers and indeed, the collapse of Eastern Europe, and thus disarmament, in 1989 is claimed to back up this declaration (Barr 1991).

It could be claimed that the above arguments can be viewed as a twisting and distortion of Clausewitzian concepts to fit into a Cold War nuclear framework. That it does not account for the tentative nature of nuclear stand offs between two sides. This view is held in the opinion of some decision-making theorists of the 1960s with regards to the Cuban missile crisis. The peaceful outcome of the Cuban missile crisis led to, in Lebow’s (1988) opinion, the idealisation of President Kennedy’s handling of the situation. It was seen as evidence that “confrontations of this kind could be managed ably and successfully” (Lebow 1988). Lebow (1987) goes on to point out that circumstance led to the peaceful conclusion of the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. The United States had “overwhelming nuclear superiority and conventional superiority in the Caribbean, the arena of the confrontation” (Lebow, 1988). These factors, combined with the truth that technology has advanced to the extent that warheads can reach their targets in minutes as opposed to the hours it would take a bomber plane at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, mean that issues of nuclear confrontation between the super powers of the Cold war were more unstable than some critics have suggested (Lebow, 1988).

Bringing the discussion back to the topic at hand, the presence of nuclear weapons as a possible form of attack has an uncontrollable nature, which has the potential to “usurp the place of policy, the moment policy had been brought into being” (Shephard 1990). If we take this into consideration when discussing how this fits in with Clausewitzian concepts, the suggestion is that as long as nuclear weapons are a potential means between two warring super powers armed with nuclear capabilities, it will be difficult to argue that a political objective is being sought. Indeed, as already discussed, the role of deterrence as a means to achieving political aims did lead to a success in the example of the Cold War, but it so easily could have been a different story. The destruction of one’s own population and society cannot be deemed a political objective and thus it has been argued that one cannot apply the

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Clausewitzian concept of 'war as a continuation of policy' (Fritz 1982).

This essay does not agree with the above view that the potential for nuclear war means Clausewitzian principles cannot apply. The realisation that a nuclear war would be counterproductive for all involved led to a conscious avoidance of nuclear war by policy makers (Echevarria, 1995). During the Cold War a concentration on more conventional means of war was taken up. This came in 1960 after the conclusion was met that "to prevent a future war from leading to unrestricted violence; the best course was not to use nuclear weapons at all" (Freedman 1986). This move toward a more conventional means and avoidance of a 'suicidal' nuclear strategy shows that the Clausewitzian concept of war being the continuation of policy by other means is applicable, as it portrays the realisation that policy could not be met in a satisfactory manner by entering into nuclear war, and thus a different direction was needed.

This essay will now point to the fact that the work of Clausewitz contains the words "each age has its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions, and its own peculiar preconceptions" (Howard and Paret 1976). This assertion is important when considering the applicability of Clausewitzian concepts to the nuclear age. That Clausewitz deems it essential that every age is judged in the light of its own peculiarities (Clausewitz 1976) proposes that he opens his concepts up to adjustment to account for advancements in technology among other things, and modernisation of society. Thus, it is proposed here that Clausewitz accounted for subjective differences for warring states throughout the ages. Work by Echevarria (1995) uses this element of Clausewitz to validate the prospect of runaway escalation and superconductivity, that it is a case of the "subjective elements of war that distinguish nuclear war from other forms of conflict in the nuclear age" (Echevarria 1995).

It is accepted that there is somewhat of a role reversal when it comes to the consequences of the Clausewitzian concept of 'friction', that a "failure to coordinate crisis policy with precision could lead to runaway escalation and nuclear war" (Lebow 1988). However, Clausewitz insists that every age be judged in light of its own peculiarities. It is argued here that the threat of all-out nuclear war can indeed be deemed as a peculiarity of our age, but that the difference to Clausewitzian concepts is so great that it cannot be applied successfully. For example, if we now return to the aforementioned concept of friction, it will allow for the illustration as to how some aspects of the nuclear age are unable to be placed in a Clausewitzian framework. The concept of 'friction' "derives from the unpredictability of combat performance as combatants are subject to the toil and life-threatening dangers of war and from uncertainty" (Teck Seng 1999), and is essentially what limits and makes war in reality different than its abstract ideal (Bassford 2008). The role of friction as an element of escalation in a nuclear conflict means that it is in opposition to what Clausewitz deemed its role as. It has been argued that this is a case of the changing nature of the ages and the subjective elements of war (Echevarria, 1995). This may be true, but in the opinion of this essay, there is too great a difference in the nature of friction as portrayed by Clausewitz when compared to its role in a nuclear standoff, for it to be considered applicable to the nuclear age.

Clausewitz viewed the concept of absolute war as a theoretical concept, and thus would have thought its potential existence as paramount to fantasy. Thus, it is the opinion of this essay that in a nuclear standoff between two super powers Clausewitzian concepts of friction and escalation cannot be applied. The dialectic of friction and genius (chance) in the framework of the 'trinity of war' will be discussed in the next paragraphs.

The Tripartite definition of war, or 'trinity of war', as proposed by Clausewitz is an essential part of his work. It consists of violence and passion – people and society (moral forces), uncertainty and chance and probability – talent of commander and forces (genius and friction), and political purpose and effect – politics, '(the business of government). They are often referred to as emotion/chance/reason (Bassford 2003).

It is claimed that the nuclear age has rendered these key Clausewitzian concepts obsolete. It is argued here that there is a truth to this despite the fact that "each component of the trinity changes over time" (Echevarria 1995). For example, due to the scale of destruction a nuclear attack would have, the only politically sound strategy to follow is one of deterrence in order to avoid nuclear war. The diplomacy is more aware of the potential consequences and runaway escalation factor, and has thus developed checks and precautions to prevent that.

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Furthermore, the military has put additional emphasis on intelligence and technical expertise and the role of the public in growing more sensitive to the fact that the future rests in the hands of a few chosen officials (Echevarria 1995). This may be the case, and it is all well and good until a nuclear weapon is launched. This removes the aspect of 'chance' from the trinity of war; there is "no room left for the creative spirit to roam" (Barr 1991: 4). The trinity is reduced to the interaction of violence and its subordination to policy. The policy, even prior to a launch, becomes avoidance of the violence, and thus nuclear deterrence becomes prominent. Therefore, in the nuclear age, the Clausewitzian trinity of war is not applicable as the element of chance and creative freedom is removed from the equation and nuclear deterrence is used as mutual threat of nuclear violence to assure the prevalence of reason on the part of both belligerents (Barr 1991).

That war is never an isolated, single, final act is a Clausewitzian concept. He stated that it could not be spread instantaneously and could not consist of one, decisive act (Barr 1991). Of course, nuclear weapons have the potential to achieve all of these things, and so does this mean this area of Clausewitzian logic is obsolete in the nuclear age?

In the opinion of the author of this essay, the answer to this question has to be yes. Although history shows the use of nuclear weapons consists solely of the 1945 bombing of Japan and that nations have been in awe of nuclear weapons and thus been deterred by the prospect of their use (Quester 2006), it has to be said that as long as nuclear weapons are a potential threat, the possibility of a single, final act is always on the cards. For example, the lack of insight into what is happening in North Korea along with Iran seemingly moving to creating their own nuclear weapon programme is worrying for one concerned with the future outcomes of nuclear weapons use.

Statements emerging from Iran of an anti-Semitic nature declaring how an Islamic nuclear weapon would be the means for destroying Israel in a single strike (Quester 2006), insist that we take the continuing threat of nuclear weapons seriously, which in turn means that the Clausewitzian concept of war never being an isolated, single, final act cannot be applied to the nuclear age.

In conclusion it can be said that this essay does not concur with either of the popular narratives on the relevance of Clausewitz to the nuclear age. It argues that some Clausewitzian concepts can apply to the nuclear age, although in the most part they do not. For instance, the fact that the Clausewitzian concept of defence as the stronger form of war can be seen as a relevance in the nuclear age, as forms of deterrence are vital with regards to nuclear weapons. Indeed, it follows the Clausewitzian principle of overthrowing the enemy and of holding out in the form of defence until this is a possibility can be applied to the framework of the Cold War and the collapse and thus overthrow of the Soviets in 1989. Additionally, the Clausewitzian idea that "each age has its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions" (Howard and Paret 1976), can be applied to the vast changes in terms of achievable destruction via nuclear weapons in the modern age.

However, this essay argues that the situation, with regards to conflict regarding two nuclear enabled super powers, is too distant from Clausewitzian core principles to be applicable. The potential realisation of 'absolute war', a term Clausewitz deemed as theoretical only, in addition to the 'friction' escalating the potential of this all out war rather than limiting it, means that Clausewitzian ideas would have to be distorted to be applicable. Furthermore, the removal of a key element of chance from Clausewitz 'trinity of war' in nuclear stand offs changes the way in which Clausewitzian concepts state how war should play out. This combined with the possibility of a nuclear strike contradicting Clausewitzian conviction that war can never be a singular, decisive act, shows that although there are some aspects of Clausewitzian concepts that can be applied to the nuclear age, for the most part a distortion of his ideas are necessary for them to fit.

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