Review - Clausewitz as Creative Director

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THOMAS WALDMAN, MAR 12 2013

In a recent article in *Foreign Policy*, John Arquilla extols a creative design approach to armed conflict, which involves 'a puzzle to be solved about what kind of force to build' – a consideration, he argues, that was ignored by even the greatest thinkers on war such as Carl von Clausewitz. The piece is thought-provoking, timely and necessary. It raises important issues as defense cuts threaten to undermine key elements of American military power. Nevertheless, I want to address a few issues raised by the piece. I do not argue against the principle of design per se, which is perfectly sensible, but I want to try to distinguish it from other concepts and perhaps restore some of Clausewitz's unfairly tarnished reputation in the process.

Conceptual Confusion

First, we need to be certain as to what design means in war; where it begins and ends in relation to other concepts. The historical examples presented in Arquilla's piece appear to cover just about every activity in war, from employing new technologies to grand strategic politicking. By applying the concept of design to all of such activities, the term simply becomes a new way of describing things we already know.

Many of the examples in the piece are simply descriptions of effective tactics and strategy. Lincoln's recognition that new technologies facilitated a non-Jominian strategy, ultimately implemented by General U. S. Grant, was simply strategic wisdom – a strategy honed in the first bloody months of the Civil War.[i] Yes, this was design of sorts, but what strategy is not just that? All strategy involves creatively applying available means and employing them in ways designed to achieve political objectives. So, the piece is not wrong in that sense, but if design covers all aspects of war, it ends up suffering from that old malady: it explains everything and nothing.

Clausewitz stated, it is important to 'clarify concepts and ideas that have become, as it were, confused and entangled. Not until terms and concepts have been defined can one hope to make any progress in examining the question clearly.'[ii] So let us try and clarify the argument. If design is meant in the narrower sense of the shaping of armed forces prior to their actual deployment or employment (what Clausewitz would have termed preparation for war),[iii] then design as a useful concept begins to make more sense. Arguably, that is what defense policy is all about: creating and maintaining forces suited to meet the challenges and threats of the day, and the next day. Creative design in this respect is vital, and all attempts must be made to avoid design that is driven by non-strategic factors (eg narrow political interest, bureaucratic in-fighting, personal ambition, etc).

To describe US initiatives in Iraq and Afghanistan (such as engaging in tribal negotiations) as design is mistaken. Of course, original failures in those contexts can be explained, at least partly, by the military's dominant so-called 'big war' stance, geared toward large-scale, attritional, fire-power-intensive operations, and sometimes dubbed the 'American way of war'. [iv] .. . That is a design issue for sure and which, to put it lightly, does not well suit the US military to the conduct of counterinsurgency operations. But does the distinction between design and good old-fashioned tactical/operational adaptability hold here? Is this just 'design on the job'? To describe any change of approach during war, at any level, as design stretches the idea too far, at least to the extent that it becomes indistinguishable from other concepts.

Clausewitz and Creativity

Contrary to Arquilla's depiction of Clausewitz, it could be argued that a design approach, understood in its broadest sense, was basic to his understanding of war, particularly in relation to the higher political-strategic level. And it is precisely the element of chance in war that demands inspired creativity. But Clausewitz's understanding of creativity was more dynamic than the largely unilateral and static approach described by Arquilla. No one 'design' or, indeed, set of designs (whether technological, organisational, operational, etc) can offer independent solutions; rather there must be a constant process of adaptation in the face of enemy actions and changing circumstances. Judging appropriate responses is one part of the essence of genius.

Book 2, Chapter 3 of *On War*, where Clausewitz discusses whether war is more like an art or science, is important here. His conclusion – that war is really neither, but 'part of man's social existence … a clash between major interests, which is resolved by bloodshed' and that it is more akin to politics, which represents the 'womb in which war develops'[v] – gets to the heart of the issue. The crucial difference is that war is not creativity directed at matter which is passive and yielding, but at 'an animate object that reacts'.[vi] This interactive element of war offers a first indication as to why we should be wary about what design alone can achieve; its success or otherwise depends on the reactions of the enemy.

Nevertheless, Clausewitz did not ignore design issues (as understood in the narrower sense as preparation for war), and Arquilla's reference to his statement about armies equipped with similar weapons relying on superior numbers is unfair.[vii] Clausewitz was describing trends as they appeared to him at the time. Elsewhere he had described how 'contemporary armies have developed almost identically in military organisation and methods … Battles will not change their character so long as both these conditions holds good.'[viii] This description might go a long way to explain the grim contests of strength displayed in the two World Wars, but many wars today are typified by huge disparities between belligerents in terms of organisation and methods. So, in Book 3, Chapter 8 Clausewitz states 'it would be seriously misunderstanding our argument, to consider numerical superiority as indispensable to victory'.[ix] The answer, as ever, depends on circumstances.

In *On War*, Clausewitz discusses preparations for war in a number of scattered sections, but also devotes an entire Book (5) to 'Military Forces' in which he discusses 'those conditions necessary to military action'. In it, Clausewitz explains that relative strength can be enhanced by 'superior organisation and equipment' (Arquilla's Roman *corvus* example), 'superior mobility' (the Lincoln example), 'novel tactics' (the Gustavus Adolphus example), and 'efforts to exploit terrain effectively' (the Ho Chi Minh Trail example).[x] If those factors had lost specific relevance in his own times because armies were more and more alike, and promptly copied any innovations introduced by the enemy, gaining superiority in relative strength would have to rely on courage, daring and morale. Clausewitz did not deny the importance of design when and where it might serve, but it is for us today to determine the possibilities modern technological, geographic, social and political contexts allow or indeed demand.

It should also be recalled that Clausewitz was personally, intensely, and actively involved in the practical design task of reshaping the Prussian armed forces in the aftermath of its massive defeats of 1806, not only with respect to tactical and operational guidelines but also in terms of far-reaching reforms that would have great consequences for Prussian military institutions and society (which reminds us that design must also look inward and more widely beyond purely military concerns). Clausewitz recognised the transformation engendered by the people's new found involvement in war as a 'nation in arms' following the French Revolution, and which the limited ceremonial-type armies of the eighteenth century were ill-suited to face.[xi] If the nations of Europe were to match Napoleon in battle, superior technology, dispositions, manoeuvres and so forth would not suffice; the whole social and political basis of the state and military institutions would need to be reconsidered (even if subsequent reforms were largely reversed after 1815).

Design to Engage

Ultimately, it is the effective employment of armed forces in combat that will be the true determinant of success in design, and this is the way Clausewitz approaches the problem. All preparation in war must be geared towards enabling the armed forces to engage the enemy 'at the right place and the right time'.[xii] The 'engagement' lies at the heart of all military activity, and Clausewitz took it for granted that the armed forces would be equipped,

organised, arranged and deployed in such a way as to maximise the chance of success. This would of course involve creative design, even if he didn't put it in such terms.

Yet, while the engagement is key, it is ensuring its proper place in the whole, directed towards the ultimate objective to bring about peace (ideally on our terms) that is the true determinant of success. This reminds us that design can only go so far and we should be cautious in seeing it as 'a secret weapon' or thinking that 'only skilful design will lead to victory'.[xiii] This might be true if the design we are talking about is strategic design, but that is plainly and simply an argument for good strategy. Conversely, if the meaning relates to decisions on what type of force to build then beware the quest for magic bullets. In the US, whether sequestration demands it or not, good design should be sought, just don't expect it to solve all strategic problems.

Were he alive today, Clausewitz would surely remind us of the great many factors that impinge on success in war. Yet one element is superior as it serves to explain and give meaning to them all: the political basis of war. Good, even glitteringly brilliant design, will mean nothing unless guided by realistic political ends and based on an accurate reading of the wider political situation. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have underlined, establishing the correct political basis for any war is 'the first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make.'[xiv]

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[i] Arquilla (2013)

[ii] Clausewitz (1993) p. 152

[iii] Ibid., p. 147

[iv] See Weigley, *The American Way of War*.

[v] Clausewitz, pp. 173

[vi] Ibid., pp. 174

[vii] Arquilla.

[viii] Clausewitz, p. 267

[ix] Ibid, p. 232

[x] Ibid., p. 335

[xi] Ibid., pp. 715-17

[xii] Ibid., p. 109

[xiii] Arquilla.

[xiv] Clausewitz, p. 100