Is Clausewitz or Sun Tzu more relevant to understanding contemporary war?

At first glance, the Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu may seem fundamentally opposed to the Prussian officer and military strategist Carl von Clausewitz. Nevertheless, while these writers may have lived in different millennia and under completely different cultural circumstances, they were both fascinated by one and the same phenomenon – war (Mahnken, 2007: 67). This essay argues that although their theories may seem outdated, both Sun Tzu and Clausewitz can still help us understand conflicts of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. It falls into three main parts: (1) an overview of why strategic theory and its defenders Sun Tzu and Clausewitz are seen as important, (2) a comparison and contrast of Sun Tzu's and Clausewitz's theories, concerning their ideas of ideal victory and the use of psychology, deception and intelligence, as well as some aspects special to Clausewitz like his paradoxical trinity of passion, probability and reason, with regard to relevant examples such as the "War on Terror", and (3) an analysis of why strategic theory and in fact, *both* Sun Tzu and Clausewitz are still relevant today.

Over time, the character and conduct of war have changed and evolved due to different cultural traditions and through the development of technology. However, the ultimate nature of war remains that of violent armed conflict fought for political goals, putting an abrupt end to the lives of military combatants, as well as to those of civilians, and tearing families apart. War thus remains a "necessary evil", as Sun Tzu saw it but also a means to achieve political aims, as Clausewitz claimed (Coker, 2002: 126). As both human nature and the nature of war have not changed despite material progress, the logic of war, which is termed strategy, is universal regarding time and space (Mahnken, 2007: 67). The argument of different types of strategy that are uniquely "Western" or "Asian" is similar to claiming that certain physical laws only apply to one specific region (ibid.) and seems increasingly irrelevant in an era of intense globalization. Indeed, strategic theory helps provide a conceptual foundation to understand war (ibid.). As Clausewitz himself put it:

"Theory will have fulfilled its main task when it is used to analyze the constituent elements of war, to distinguish precisely what at first sight seems fused, to explain in full the properties of the means employed and to show the probable effects, to define clearly the nature of the ends in view, and to illuminate all phases of warfare in a thorough critical inquiry." (Clausewitz, 1989: 141)

Rather than establishing fixed laws and principles, theory is supposed to help us think analytically. With this in mind, we should not expect to find the truth in Sun Tzu's and Clausewitz' writings but they should be seen as tools to recognize similar patterns of strategy in contemporary conflicts.

Historians are unsure of when precisely Sun Tzu lived or whether he lived at all. His lifetime is roughly placed between 722-221 BC (McNeilly, 2001: 4). What is of greater significance here is that his work *The Art of War* has survived until today; and as warfare, diplomacy, espionage and assassination have remained relevant to this date, it comes as no great surprise that it has been eagerly studied by soldiers, military leaders and leaders of state alike, including eighth century Japanese samurai and Mao Zedong (ibid: 5). Although *The Art of War* became available in the West around 1772, no exact equivalent of it has been made (ibid.). According to Sun Tzu, "war is a matter of vital importance to the state; a matter of life or death, the road either to survival or to ruin. Hence, it is imperative that it be studied thoroughly" (1993: 100). State craft and warfare are seen as reciprocal, as yin and yang. Germany's Kaiser

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Wilhelm is supposed to have said "I wish I had read The Art of War twenty years ago", referring to his defeat in the First World War (cited in Bloodworth & Bloodworth, 2009: 90), while the British military historian Liddel Hart stated that had Sun Tzu been more widely read by World War One generals, the horrors of trench warfare could have been avoided (McNeilly, 2001: 6). In contrast, the Western scientific tradition of categorization has separated the concepts of military arts and warfare from politics and statecraft (ibid.). Thus, Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* is the most prominent book on state craft whereas Clausewitz' *On War* is concerned with military theory (ibid.). Clausewitz definition of war is based on Aristotle's teleology, his distinction between ends and means (Coker, 2002: 126). Hence, he sees war as "not a mere act of policy, but a true political instrument, a continuation of political activity by other means" (1989: I/1. 24. 87). This way of perceiving war is still typical for the West today. Unlike Clausewitz, Sun Tzu sees war as neither instrumental nor existential but rather as a product of necessity (Coker, 2002: 126). It is evil and disturbs the Tao, which is why it must be managed (ibid.).

Sun Tzu and Clausewitz differ in their views on an ideal victory. For Sun Tzu, ultimate victory is at the level of grand strategy (Scobell, 2005). A flawless victory is speedy and without bloodshed: "To subdue the enemy without fighting is the supreme excellence" (Sun Tzu, tr. Shibing, 1993: 105). A good general should aim to ruin the enemy's strategy, shattering his will to fight by use of psychology and deception rather than fully destroy the enemy (ibid.). The best option to win a war is to leave the enemy's state intact and capture its army. According to Sun Tzu, this is more rewarding than winning a hundred battles (ibid.). This is not an easy thing to achieve, especially when one has in mind contemporary conflicts with difficult terrains as Afghanistan and Iraq, where it is not even easy to spot the enemy. Clausewitz, unlike Sun Tzu, claims that a reluctance to fight may be of advantage to the enemy and that the key to victory in war is usually destroying the enemy's army (ibid: 76).

"Kind-hearted people might of course think that there was some ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed, and might imagine that 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" (Clausewitz, 1989: 75).

Sun Tzu, however, only advises to destroy the enemy's army after attacks on the opponent's strategy and diplomacy in order to destroy its alliances have failed (Sun Tzu, tr. Shibing, 1993: 105).

Another contrast between the two authors' views can be found with regard to intelligence (Mahnken, 2007: 77). Sun Tzu writes that, if the leader has completely assessed the situation, the outcome of war can be foreseen. "To gauge the outcome of war we must compare the two sides by assessing their relative strengths. … On the basis of this comparison I know who will win and who will lose" (Sun Tzu, tr. Ames, 1993: 103-104). It is vitally important, Sun Tzu writes, to gather as much information as possible about the enemy in order to analyse its strengths and weaknesses and gain comparative advantage. "Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be defeated" (Sun Tzu, tr. Shibing, 1993: 106). There are countless examples of wars which could have taken a different turn, had there been a higher level of information on one's self and one's enemy. Hence, the use of intelligence was vital during the Cuban Missile Crisis (McNeilly, 2001: 6). The strategy of calculating strengths and weaknesses is also very relevant in the War on Terror today. Thus, Al-Quaida attacked the US on 9/11, immensely shocking their opponent. Of course, understanding one's self and one's adversary is not always an easy task, particularly considering the use of propaganda, misperception and ethnocentrism (Mahnken, 2007: 77). The Revolution in Military Affairs that concentrates on adapting US warfare to future demands and is especially tied to information and modern communications has so far proved difficult (Spear, 2008: 401). The traditional role of the military is changing from providing foot-soldiers to creating "information warriors" (ibid.). Clausewitz, however, is more sceptical of intelligence: "Many intelligence reports in war are contradictory; even more are false, and most are uncertain" (Clausewitz, 1989: 117). He certainly has a point. In practice, it is never easy to fully assess a conflict situation, especially in contemporary warfare, which offers almost endless possibilities. In 1914, the Great Powers did not foresee that the First World War was going to be as long and destructive as it was. Nor did the US have a clue that it would lose out in the Vietnam War, even after having won all the battles.

While the above has concentrated foremost on Sun Tzu, the following two paragraphs focuses on Clausewitz' views: He claims that the character of war is determined by the interactions of a paradoxical trinity of passion, probability

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and reason, which generally correspond to the people, the military and the government, respectfully (Clausewitz, 1989: 89). People are driven by passion and hatred can move states to fight, soldiers must often face uncertainty and friction and rationale are what governments base their decisions on (Mahnken, 2007: 72). The trinity can still help us understand relevant conflicts and the issue of "winning hearts and minds" combining passion and reason. Clausewitz views the nature of a war as a necessary preconception in order to develop a strategy. "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 on which they are embarking" (1989: 88-89). A war can thus be seen as short and limited in scope, just as the First World War was viewed by political and military leaders before its real character unfolded (Mahnken, 2007: 73). The invasion of Iraq, 2003 was supposed to be over in a few weeks, but its nature was deeply underestimated. For Clausewitz, unlike for Sun Tzu, victory is achieved by attacking the enemy's centre of gravity, which is likely to be its army, or otherwise its capital city, principal ally, leader or public opinion (Clausewitz, 1989: 595-6). In 1991, Iraq's military was seen as the centre of gravity, when in fact the power lay with Saddam Hussein's government (Mahnken, 2007: 74).

Moreover, Clausewitz distinguishes between limited and unlimited aims. Wars fought for limited aims are "merely to occupy some of [the enemy's] frontier districts" (Clausewitz, 1989: 69), whereas the goal of unlimited wars is "to overthrow the enemy" (ibid.). The difference is illustrated by the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq War. In 1991, the US-led coalition tried to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation, but in 2003 there ensued an unlimited aim to overturn Saddam Hussein's regime (Mahnken, 2007: 74). Clausewitz argues for the necessity of a correlation between the value a state attaches to its aims and the means used. "…the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in *magnitude* and also in *duration*…" (1989:92). This may help explain why the US remained in Korea despite 33,000 deaths but pulled out of Somalia after the death of eighteen men (Mahnken, 2007: 75). However, it does not explain why states sometimes exceed a rational point of surrender, such as one may argue was the case in Vietnam. Clausewitz does note that the original political aims can often change throughout the war, as they are influenced by its events (1989: 92). A further concept described by Clausewitz is friction, which can make the simplest activities very difficult in war – "the only concept that more or less corresponds to the factors that distinguish real war from war on paper" (ibid: 119). Friction can refer to the danger presented by the enemy, what is asked from one's own forces, a difficult terrain, or the issue of being uncertain of what is happening (Mahnken, 2007: 75). In Vietnam but also in Afghanistan, friction occurred because of the wild physical environment.

Scholars have increasingly questioned the relevance of strategic theory, claiming that technology has changed and is changing historical forms of combat.

"Military theorists from Sun Tzu to Clausewitz have pointed out the value of understanding one's enemies and the geographical-political-social-context in which they operate. What is different, however, is that some technologies – available either now or soon – will give the United States an edge that approaches omniscience at least relative to any potential opponent" (Owens, 1995: 133).

Indeed, technology has changed warfare immensely. However, to speak of "omniscience" of the US military seems rather far-fetched, considering the nuclear weapons in Iraq it sought to protect the world from were never found, seeing that it still can't find the man it has been hunting since 9/11 and has a hard time at recognizing friend and foe in Iraq and Afghanistan. Undoubtedly, the US has the most advanced technology and the strongest military in the world, but this has not necessarily helped it win wars. Thus, there is yet no valid alternative to strategic theory. Clausewitz may have described a different type of war, i.e. war on a battlefield between two states, but essentially war is the same phenomenon. Thus, Clausewitz' concept of friction certainly has enduring value and can be applied to contemporary wars (Mahnken, 2007: 79). Moreover, the success of Operation Desert Storm in the Persian Gulf was largely due coalition strategists' use of Sun Tzu (McNeilly, 2001: 3). In addition, it is known that Al-Qaeda supporters have used Sun Tzu for guidance (Qurashi, 2002). It is important to attempt to see the bigger picture of how strategic theory fits into the twenty-first century – one cannot expect to find all answers to successful warfare in Clausewitz and Sun Tzu. It is certainly unlikely to find much concrete advice on how to handle modern technology in contemporary armed conflicts.

Both Sun Tzu and Clausewitz have their stronger and weaker points. Clausewitz has strongly influenced Western

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strategy and is thus certainly useful to explain the two total wars of the twentieth century. As shown above, several aspects of Clausewitz theory, such as the paradoxical trinity, the concepts of limited and unlimited wars, as well as rational calculation and friction also fit into the picture of today's wars. One may argue, however, that Clausewitz is primarily important regarding Western actors, whereas Sun Tzu's *Art of War* is more useful when studying conflicts that include Non-Western actors and asymmetrical tactics, as these are based on traditions different from the West. At the same time, Clausewitz' definition of war as a continuation of politics is also has great meaning for the contemporary conflict with Al-Quaeda: It emphasizes that war is politics and thus a clear political goal is necessary to achieve an end, by use of political tools, not merely force (ITDIS, 2006: 7). Sun Tzu's theories may once again gain in importance with the potential rise of China as a superpower in the twenty-first century (McNeilly, 2001: 7). Certainly, Western leaders should study Sun Tzu, even if they do not use his tactics, to get a better idea of the adversary, who might be using them (McCready, 2003). Sun Tzu is, however, also helpful to understand skilful secrecy and deception used in World War Two battles, such as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and the Allies' misleading the Germans about where exactly they would invade France (ibid: 6). Moreover, it is interesting to note that both Sun Tzu and Clausewitz theories are now used in business as managers have realized their worth in their field (The Economist, 2002, McCormick, 2001). Considering all this, rather than perceiving one as more relevant than the other, it is wiser to realize that both Sun Tzu and Clausewitz teach lessons that can be applied to our time.

In conclusion, this essay has argued that both Sun Tzu and Clausewitz are important to help us understand modern strategy. Both offer interesting and at times, very different aspects on warfare that can help us analyze wars of the twentieth and the twenty-first century. Sun Tzu may be more insightful on asymmetrical conflicts with Non-Western actors, due to their very different traditions and concepts of war. Also, with regard to the growth of China, which greatly reflects on its ancient philosophers, it makes good sense to study Sun Tzu at this moment in time. Still, Clausewitz is thus by no means rendered irrelevant. Some of his concepts, such as friction, are of great importance in contemporary wars often fought on difficult terrains. Scholars such as Owens (1995: 133) have challenged the relevance of Sun Tzu and Clausewitz and argued that the advancement of modern technology demands new strategic theory. So far, however, there is no strategic theory that can fully replace the classical strategists Sun Tzu and Clausewitz (Mahnken, 2007: 78-79). Moreover, it cannot be evidenced that the information age and modern technology have altered the fundamental nature of war (ibid.). As long as the nature of war remains unchanged, it is the same phenomenon that Sun Tzu contemplated millennia ago and that Clausewitz studied in the nineteenth century.

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Written by: Nicola-Ann Hardwick
Written at: Royal Holloway, University of London
Written for: Dr Michael Williams
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