

The Whispering Prussian: Clausewitz and Modern Wars

Written by Muhammad Alaraby

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MUHAMMAD ALARABY, OCT 21 2020

The relevance of past wisdom to our modern affairs has always been debatable. Carl von Clausewitz and his theory of war are not an exception. Since *On War* was posthumously published in 1832, many conflicts have taken place beyond its pages. Equally the international system has changed character several times, states have infused and diffused, and politics has become generally more complex and inclusive than in the time of the Prussian general. War itself has changed; the world, it seems, has short supply of big wars between states, whereas proxy wars, cyber wars, drones, ethnic conflicts and terrorism have dominated international conflict. Clausewitz's wisdom seems to be obsolete. His eloquent inquiry into war appears to have little to say about today's modes of conflict and future wars. All these facts may make Clausewitz irrelevant and unnecessary for serious analysts or policymakers, let alone fighters on the ground or in hi-tech war rooms.

Clausewitz, nevertheless, makes a last stand. It is his theory that can sharpen our understanding of war as a human affair, which is invested with violence, uncertainty, and political disputes. Ironically, these aspects of war and conflict that today's world undergoes, can render Clausewitz more relevant than ever. This article shall argue that Clausewitz did not intend to portray or conceptualize any specific type of war. On the contrary, his work is an inquiry into the nature of war as a human activity shaped by passion, reason, and unpredictability. Additionally, this piece presumes that the supposed transformation of war is a gross overstatement that can be challenged by the Clausewitzian paradigm. For doing so, I will discuss first the so-called new changes of modern conflicts, that gave a rise to the anti-Clausewitzian paradigm and its main arguments. As a counterargument, I will tackle Clausewitz's relevance to modern conflicts and its utility for our understating of "war."

Modern Conflicts: What Is New?

There are several elements in contemporary wars that make them utterly different from those of the nineteenth century, when Clausewitz lived and fought. From the 19th century onwards the technical innovations and socio-political transformations of the industrial age brought about a systemic change in the conduct of war in the West and around the world (Gilbert, 2014). Thus, war moved from the realm of strategic ingenuity to the employment of increasingly advanced equipment. By the end of The Second World War and the advent of nuclear war with its related notions of deterrence and balance of terror, the process of change reached a peak of destructiveness.

Furthermore, since the 1990s technological armaments have surpassed nuclear warfare, and the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) has reached new heights. Aiming at achieving effectiveness, the RMA has deployed new innovations of information technology (IT) to serve military goals. The RMA has led to rapid and dramatic improvements in the American ways of war in the Gulf (1991), Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (2001-present) and Iraq (2003–2011) (see O'Hanlon, 2020) ; yet without strategic implications (Gray, 2011). Along with this, the rapid advancement in artificial intelligence that has invigorated companies such as Google and Amazon is poised to bring an unprecedented surge in military innovation, as a 2015-Harvard-Study has shown (Simonite, 2017). Moreover, these aspects add to the complexity of world affairs, and accordingly to the warfare that has become characterized by chaos and non-linearity. As strategists began to draw their analysis on chaos theory in the 1990s, the US Department of Defense coined a new term in which to discuss contemporary conflict: VUCA – standing for Volatile, Uncertain, Chaotic and Ambiguous (Gidley, 2017).

The Whispering Prussian: Clausewitz and Modern Wars

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Change is not only about technology and war but its scale and plurality of belligerents have transformed as well. The end of the cold war and the ideological struggle between the East and the West gave rise to the dominance of intra-state conflicts. Identity-based conflicts engulfed several parts of Asia, Africa, and Europe following the collapse of the USSR (Gray, 2011). Instead of total and limited wars between states, low-intensity conflicts have become the norm in many parts of the world—the developing in particular. They take the shape of prolonged conflicts with less casualties in comparison with the unfolding conflict (van Creveld, 1991).

The nation-state is no longer the sole warmonger in international politics since wars have become increasingly irregular and asymmetric. From the 1990s, most adversarial belligerents in conflicts are non-state actors, such as terrorist networks like Al-Qaida and The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The American war on terror following the events of 9/11 pushed counter-insurgency and terrorism to the fore of the agenda of world order. Since then, the war on terror, both domestically and overseas, has become a priority to many states and a convenient pretext for strategic competition.

The Anti-Clausewitzian Wave

All these “transformations” gave rise to what Gray (2011) has called anti-Clausewitzian theorizing by the cult of “new wars” in the 1990s and 2000s. For these scholars, several aspects of Clausewitz’s paradigm on war fell short of realizing the transformation of warfare, which makes him obsolete. For example, the British historian John Keegan (1993) argued that Clausewitzian thought is confined to his cultural limitations, and as such his depiction of war is defective. For Keegan, Clausewitz was a legitimate child of the Enlightenment, German Romanticism and the Prussian-Fredrickian tradition of the centralized state. These associations made him keen on seeing war only through the intertwining of politics and the Napoleonic war. Had Clausewitz furnished his sophisticated mind with other intellectual dimensions, Keegan insisted, he would have been able to conceive war beyond politics—war as an expression of culture (1993, 21–22). Identity wars as centered on culture are an example of the failure of the Clausewitzian paradigm.

Coining the argument of warfare transformation, the Israeli historian Martin van Creveld contended that the Clausewitzian Universe assumes that war is made predominantly by states or, to be exact, by governments (1991, 87). It is an assumption that is not entirely compatible with today’s states, which are: “artificial creations, corporate bodies that possess an independent legal existence separate from the people to whom they belong and whose organized life they claim to represent” (Van Creveld, 1991, 87). Van Creveld also argued that as Clausewitz identifies all forms of war with states alone, leading to the conclusion that wherever there is no state, the scale of social violence, cannot be considered war. In other words, war is an impossibility without the involvement of a state. This assumption, Van Creveld argued, ignores the warfare that has been waged by non-state actors since Classical Antiquity until the liberation wars in Algeria and Vietnam and the new low-intensity wars (1991, 99). Concluding this, he suggests that the Clausewitzian paradigm is rapidly becoming outmoded and redundant, no longer able to provide us with a proper framework for understanding war.

Attempting to build an alternative paradigm for understanding war in the past, present and the future, Van Creveld presents a broad framework of five issues that he claims can be applied to the transformative nature of war (1991, 302-349). Van Creveld’s framework asks us to locate: who fights the war; what is war all about; how war is fought; for what the war is fought and, lastly, why the war is fought. However, this new paradigm falls short of explaining what it claims as a transformation of war and politics. It is no different than what Clausewitz was indeed trying to show us that war occurs as a result of human reasons. As Lawrence Freedman notes, those who regard *On War* as defective and obsolete seem to have entered a competition as if their credibility depended on undermining Clausewitz (2011, 86).

Clausewitz’s War

To discuss Clausewitz relevance to modern conflicts, it is necessary to point out two issues: first is that Clausewitz never aimed to establish a “general theory of war” (Murray, 2011), nor did he intend to explain specific conflict taking place during his age or create a manual for his colleagues. In fact, His project was far more ambitious, as Freedman

The Whispering Prussian: Clausewitz and Modern Wars

Written by Muhammad Alaraby

(2011) puts it. Clausewitz intended to develop a conceptual framework that captured the essence of war for subsequent generations which they can return to in order to make sense of their own conflicts (Freedman, 2011, 86). *On War* is, therefore, an open project; it was not a complete work as its author's life was cut short before revising it. The ambiguity of the text that resulted in its incomplete arguments, contradictions and inconsistencies, invites several interpretations. This is also the book's strength, as Hew Strachan puts it, "it is very essence and the reason for its longevity. It is work in progress. Its unfinished nature should be a source not of frustration but of joy." (Strachan in Gray, 2011)

Bringing this discussion to contemporary warfare, we must first assess to what extent war has transformed. I would argue that transformation is an overstatement and is based on a historical perception of warfare. As discussed above, it is apparent that war has changed in its means with RMA, its related techniques, and its scale over time, as we can see from today's unfolding conflicts in the Middle East, for example. Nevertheless, it has not changed in its essence since the first war homo sapiens had waged; for it still waged for the same material reasons and cloaked by religious or secular or ethnical ideologies and fueled by aggression, hatred (see Gat, 2006). Clausewitz's definition of war serves this human fact. For him "War is nothing but a duel on a larger scale. Countless duels go to make up war ... War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will" (Clausewitz, 2008, p. 13). Imposing will, therefore, is the cornerstone of war as human conflict.

The imposition of will requires predefined objectives. Clausewitz was not able to perceive war without objectives (Hauser, 2010). These objectives, by definition, develop outside the military sphere; they are political in nature (Moran, 2007). This brings us to his famous and ever-controversial dictum: "War not a merely an act of policy, but a true political instrument, continuation of political intercourse carried out by other means." (Clausewitz, 1989, 87) Whether Clausewitz meant by *Politik* policy or politics, it is clear that he reasoned war as belonging to the broader, multilateral, interactive realm of politics (Bassford, 2007). Freedman (2011, p. 86) argues that the main point of the dictum is that political underpinning dissociates war from senseless violence, but it does not propose that war is always a rational expression of policy, or that the movement between the two realms is neatly defined. Whilst strategy is to rationalize war, it is limited by the sharpness of confrontation and violence that can exacerbate the influence of emotions and chance. Nevertheless, it is essential to link war to policy through strategy in light of Clausewitzian frictions; otherwise, it will be whimsical and nihilistic. In Clausewitz's own words, he concludes that: "It is clear that war should never be thought of as something autonomous but always as an instrument of policy; otherwise the entire history of war would contradict us" (2008,30).

Returning to his critics, Clausewitz's *Politik* is not a defined realm of social existence. In fact, it is a dynamic expression of subjective and intersubjective wills. Therefore, even if today's wars have cultural or religious objectives, it is the politicization of these identities that causes conflicts. Even pre-modern communal conflicts have a political nature, as communities were struggling over resources and values.

Clausewitz's Trinity Today

The Trinity is the cornerstone of Clausewitz's thought on war and the key to his magnitude as *the* philosopher of war. He holds that: "war as a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always make war a paradoxical trinity—composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes subject to reason" (Clausewitz, 2008,30).

Accordingly, the trinity adds complication to Clausewitz's politics-war nexus; it suggests that policy is not only in command, but rather a factor among others shaping war (Freedman 2011, 87). The outcome of war, therefore, depends on the *interplay* of the three elements, as opposed to any single element alone. This interaction is inherently unstable and shifting (Bassford, 2007). Clausewitz associates the dimension of violence-hatred-enmity with the people; the dimension of probability and chance with the commander; and that of subordination to politics with the government. During the First and Second World Wars, Clausewitz was fundamentally interpreted through the narrow lens of the secondary trinity (the people, the military, and the government), while the primary intangible dimensions became wholly overshadowed.

The Whispering Prussian: Clausewitz and Modern Wars

Written by Muhammad Alaraby

This line of analysis suggests that the “New War” prophets have read Clausewitz in a reductionist manner. Heuser (2008, xxviii) rightfully argues that putting excessive emphasis on Clausewitz’s secondary trinity as distinct elements dilutes their intention, whilst formulating this concept. Working together or in competition as magnet poles, they explain war’s tendency to escalate to ever greater violence. The more the people’s passions are invoked, the more political constraints are at play, the more prepared or not the genius of the commanders and the morale of their forces. Bassford (2007) wonders whether *any* war-fighting political construct can be analogous to each of these elements, for example, in the case of a non-state actor (popular base, fighters, and leadership).

The trinity, therefore, can be easily applied as a conceptual framework to several contemporary conflictual settings. It surpasses the transformation made by technology or the scales and actors in conflict. The Middle East may provide an exemplary application of the trinity in contemporary non-European situations. The region is afflicted by irregular wars mainly between states and non-state armed organizations in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Turkey. These conflicts are taking place against the background of social fractures and sectarian violence (element 1); post-hegemonic instability structure in which uncertainty, complexity, and chaos prevail (element 2); as well as violence is used as an instrument to achieve the actors’ objectives (element 3). It is these tensions between the trinity’s elements that make wars, low and high intensity alike, escalate; as long as the rationalization strategy is absent.

Conclusion

In summation, the purpose of this article has been to suggest that Clausewitz still has a lot to say about our wars. Clearly, Clausewitz’s *On War* lacks the economic component that explains the causal factors leading to a number of imperial and post-imperial wars across the world. It has also little to say about international law, and he is, indeed, massively Eurocentric. However, Clausewitz forged the most provocative framework of thinking about war as a human affair of passion, unpredictability and reason. This structure may not be of great explanatory strength. That being said, it does educate the mind of the analyst/practitioner.

No wonder that Clausewitz made a great comeback following the Vietnam War in the US, since his thought influenced the strategic reconsideration of both the military and political levels. It was this renaissance of Clausewitz that gave rise to Weinberger Doctrine (1984) and Powell Doctrine respectively (Gilbert, 2014). The following excerpt from an article during the Gulf War in 1990 shows the shadows he casts on the discussions of the military-political circles within the G. H. Bush Administration.

“A dead Prussian haunts the Pentagon, the White House and Capitol Hill. Lately, he’s been in those Senate hearings on the Persian Gulf crisis, swaggering among the experts, whispering in their ears, seizing their tongues, making them parrot the ideas of a book from another century” (Achenbach, 1990).

A growing body of literature about conflicts in the 21st century (Barret, 2012; Coker, 2017; Frank, Patrick, 2013; Sayigh, Yezid, 2016; Singer & Brookings, 2018) is proving also that he still whispers; in the civil war in Syria, in the American army Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, in the power game between Iran and the US. Even they can teach us on the shadowy warfare over social media platforms. All of these developments prove that the past wisdom can be useful in pondering the nature of conflict, apart from the form it takes or the field it takes place on, as a reflection of the realities of human condition.

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The Whispering Prussian: Clausewitz and Modern Wars

Written by Muhammad Alaraby

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The Whispering Prussian: Clausewitz and Modern Wars

Written by Muhammad Alaraby

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