Is the Nature of War Changing? Time to Avoid a Supposedly Unavoidable Question

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Asking whether the nature of war is changing seems innocuous at first glance but should be taken with a grain of salt. For what is this nature of war that is supposed to be changing? And does this question refer to the ability of change as such, or does it reflect curiosity about current processes? A look at ongoing debates among scholars of war studies suggests the latter. Therefore, it may be time to examine and critically evaluate the theoretical foundations and practical consequences of the claim that the nature of war is changing and that it has recently changed.

This paper will show that the notion of a nature of war finds a particular long-lasting expression in the Westphalian-Clausewitzian conceptualisation of war. This neologism, adopted from Bousquet (2015, 104), describes a particular political-rational understanding of war in the context of European wars and state formation from the 17th to the 19th century. In light of alleged “new wars” today, such a conceptualisation has become widely regarded as no longer analytically useful. However, I argue that while attempts to re-conceptualise war are breaking with the eternity in the notion of a nature of war, they are not overcoming a Clausewitzian mindset since they hold on to the idea of a nature of war. This not only impedes analytical progress but also creates the opportunity for normative comparability facilitating military interventionism reminiscent of pre-Clausewitzian times. Only abandoning the notion of a nature of war and allowing conceptual plurality may prevent such unpleasant consequences.

After defining war as a historically contingent concept, I will historicise the Westphalian-Clausewitzian conceptualisation of war with a particular focus on the emerging notion of the nature of war. Subsequently, I will critically examine the so-called “New Wars Thesis” and the derived need for a conceptual departure from the Westphalian-Clausewitzian conceptualisation. Mary Kaldor’s work will serve as an example to demonstrate that current re-conceptualisation attempts are not breaking with the notion of a nature of war. Finally, after presenting the resulting theoretical and practical consequences, I will propose a new perspective on the need for a new conceptualisation, which may prevent regression and facilitate progression.

The Concept of War

In this paper, war is treated as a historically contingent concept with a meaning-making function. What is defined as war depends on the social and historical conditions that render phenomena understandable in one way or another (Bousquet 2015, 96; see also Coker 2010, 13). This has two implications for critical analysis. On the one hand, it turns attention to how actors make analytical sense of the actions they ascribe meaning to by defining them as war (Bousquet 2015, 93). On the other hand, it becomes crucial to examine the actions considered legitimate that were derived from a concept of war and reflect on their consequences. Before approaching the concept of war and the nature of war with these two insights, it must moreover be recognised that multiple competing concepts of a phenomenon may coexist. This creates an awareness of the power that comes with a temporary predominance of a concept. As Rapaport’s (1968, 11) identification of three conceptualisations shows, the same applies to the concept of war. The eschatological, according to which war is a mission with a grand design, the cataclysmic, conceptualising war as a catastrophe and, finally, the Clausewitzian conceptualisation of war are thus coexisting, sometimes even competing, alternatives. The last one arguably stands out as particularly influential given its longevity in numerous academic disciplines, including Political Science, International Law, and International Relations. Furthermore, it is

this conceptualisation of war in which we encounter the notion of the nature of war and from which theorists still do not entirely break away today.

A Westphalian-Clausewitzian Nature of War

For Clausewitz, war is an "act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will" and "pushed to its utmost bounds" (Von Clausewitz 2010, 44; Ibid, 47). War is understood as a political instrument employed rationally by two belligerent but morally equal parties. Most important for this analysis, however, is one particular philosophical underpinning of this conceptualisation: Clausewitz' dialectic between ideal and real war (Ibid, 79). While the latter captures changing manifestations of war, the former constitutes the essential nature of war. It is the common denominator to which all wars, whatever their current manifestation, tend and are ultimately in reference to (Ibid, 73; Kaldor 2010, 272). Thus, Clausewitz' conceptualisation of war is based on a philosophical dialectic between a nature of war (*Wesen*) and changing forms of war (*Formen*). As will become evident, today's attempts at a re-conceptualisation of war are still rooted in this distinction.

Before turning to this argument, the terminology "Westphalian-Clausewitzian" adopted from Bousquet (2015, 104) already indicates a necessity to historically contextualise this conceptualisation and the inherent notion of the nature of war. Following the two analytical insights previously established, it is crucial to examine what made this concept and the idea of a nature of war *thinkable* and what it in turn *rendered meaningful*. First, the dialectic between the ideal and the real is believed to have its origin in Clausewitz' philosophical frame of reference. The notion of a nature of war could have its origin in German Idealists like Kant and Hegel, who "set out to invest traditional kinds of knowledge with an essential 'core' or 'nature'" (Coker 2010, 12). While the assumption of a direct influence must be refrained from, one can nevertheless claim that such ideas shaped the political climate accompanying the formation of the Westphalian state system. Heuser (2002, 186), for example, identifies this mindset in 19th century Prussian military thinkers. Second, apart from such philosophical influence as an enabling context for Clausewitz' conceptualisation of war, the dialectic between the ideal and the real also enabled a view on war as a productive force in human affairs. According to Bartelson (2016, 353-354), war was seen as "productive of sociopolitical order" as well as the "spatio-temporal limits of the state and the international system" during the early 17th to the late 19th century. This productive view also highlights the importance of stakeholders in enabling the assertiveness of one conceptualisation over alternatives. In this case, the Westphalian-Clausewitzian conceptualisation may be understood as serving a Western European audience (cf. Barkawi 2016). Accordingly, the Clausewitzian conceptualisation has to be understood firstly as a way of making analytical sense of a reality that for Western spectators was mainly characterised by wars between two or more morally equal sovereign actors and a clear distinction between the domestic and the international. Secondly, it has to be regarded as enabling the conditions under which such state-formation processes became possible and meaningful. As will become apparent, it is such productivity of war that can be said to have returned due to not abandoning the Clausewitzian mindset of a nature of war.

Alleged New Wars

The claim that the nature of war is changing is principally associated with the "New Wars Thesis". While multiple research strands fall under this label, they all share the observation that contemporary manifestations of war are qualitatively different from the time described by Clausewitz. Three phenomena identified by Münkler (2004, 10-11) as the main novelties may be listed here as examples: Denationalisation, asymmetrisation and autonomisation. New wars are characterised by a change in temporal and geographical scope while the distinction between the domestic and the international becomes increasingly blurred. Thus, war is no longer waged mainly by states but often involves various actors and increasingly takes the form of transnational or intrastate warfare. Furthermore, the symmetry of war is said to have given way to an asymmetry, abandoning former equality between conflicting parties. Lastly, what was confined to the military in the past, is now gaining independence with violence extending its autonomy. Apart from these main developments, other interrelated observations are the development of a globalised war economy, a change in actors' motivations, or the increasing targeting of civilians (cf. Kaldor 2012; Münkler 2004).

However, the New Wars Thesis has not remained without criticism. Arguably, the most serious accusation is that the

supposedly new wars are not unprecedented or that the claim of their novelty is an exaggeration at best. Even Münkler, a proponent of the New Wars Thesis, admits some similarity of the supposedly new wars to pre-Westphalian conflicts. Asymmetric warfare and intra-state conflicts are often exemplary for commonalities between contemporary and pre-Westphalian manifestations of war (Münkler 2004, 9; Kalyvas 2001). Others go further and suggest that the Westphalian-Clausewitzian conceptualisation has overshadowed attention to other non-state forms of war during the modern era (cf. Barkawi 2016). Newman (2004, 179), for example, questions the relevance of this thesis with a scathing verdict by arguing that "all factors that characterise new wars have been present, to varying degrees, throughout the last 100 years". In turning to the demands for a re-conceptualisation of war and its practical consequences now, one should keep these fragile pillars on which the New Wars Thesis stands in mind.

Moving Away and Hanging On

By asserting that contemporary manifestations of war are "new", the New Wars Thesis depends on an empirical comparison with the wars of the modern state system. This is not necessarily problematic since "war is intelligible only in reference to those things that it is believed to have constituted in the past" (Bartelson 2017, 24). However, this assertion has resulted in intellectual puzzlement on how to make analytical sense of contemporary wars under supposedly new conditions (Münkler 2004, 63). Subsequently, many scholars concluded that the Westphalian-Clauswitzian conceptualisation had lost analytical usefulnessto understand today's practices of political violence (Bartelson 2017, 9; 2016, 353). However, we not only observe a "twilight" of the Clausewitzian conceptualisation of war (Bousquet 2015, 92) but also various attempts at re-conceptualising war and rendering contemporary wars analytically useful.

Just like it was the case with the empirical manifestations of war, attempts for a new conceptualisation were and still are formulated *in relation* to the Westphalian-Clausewitzian one (Bousquet 2015, 97). This is particularly well illustrated by the example of Mary Kaldor, one of the scholars who provided the impetus for the New Wars Thesis. In an article whose title already enquires about the relevance of Clausewitz in contemporary times, Kaldor explicitly uses Clausewitz' terminology in trying to define the novelties of the present. She even takes up his choice of words to argue that new wars are a continuation of *politics* by other means and not *policy* (Kaldor 2010, 278). This closeness to Clausewitz is importantly also evident in the adherence to the distinction between the nature of war (*Wesen*) and its forms (*Formen*). She asserts that today's wars are of a "different inner nature" (Ibid, 271) compared to the wars of Clausewitz' times. Hence, the nature of war to which all wars tend has allegedly changed: "The inner tendency of such conflicts is not victory or defeat but for permanent inconclusive war that spreads across borders." (Ibid., 275)

This example shows how despite the expressed need to move beyond the Westphalian-Clausewitzian conceptualisation of war, the dialectic between a nature of war and changing manifestations of war remains part of attempts at re-conceptualising war. By arguing that the nature of war has changed today, the idea of an eternal nature of war may have been abandoned, but the belief that a nature of war can be identified has not been discarded. While this mindset becomes explicit in Kaldor's text, it remains implicit in many others. The result is a potentially far-reaching attempt to emancipate from a supposedly outdated concept without entirely breaking with its analytical categories.

Inviting a Normative Stance

But does this provide a basis for concern? Such re-conceptualisations are problematic in that by defining a new nature of war that differs from a past one, comparability is created that can be normatively charged. Thus, the change in the nature of war can quickly be imbued with negative significance and understood as a problem. Is permanent inconclusiveness, as Kaldor defines the new nature of war, not a state of disarray? Adherence to the notion of a nature of war runs the risk of triggering this thought. There are numerous examples of such normativity in academia. Modern warfare may be seen as irrational barbaric violence (cf. Angstrom and Duyvesteyn 2005, 7) or the alleged "chaos, savagery and pointlessness" characteristic of new wars and its "politically chaotic and military atrocious" nature may be directly linked to so-called failed states (Snow 1997, 129; 1996, 105). Those who take a normative stance towards a newly defined and updated nature of war may even see hope in the possibility for change. Not only may today's nature of war be regarded as problematic, keeping a Clausewitzian terminology

enables normative comparability with the Clausewitzian nature of war seen as normatively superior. If the nature of war has changed (once) – why should it not change (back) again? Can the identified change in the nature of war not be a temporary state of deficiency, and should a return to the "orderly" nature of war not be sought? Indeed, the Westphalian-Clausewitzian conceptualisation of war is still so strongly entrenched that beliefs in the normative superiority of the Clausewitzian nature of war continue to be widespread (Coker 2010, 12; Bartelson 2017, 2; Gat 1992, 67).

As has become apparent, the Westphalian state system has offered an empirical reference point for recognising an alleged difference of contemporary manifestations of war. Likewise, the Westphalian-Clausewitzian conceptualisation of war was employed for conceptual delimitation. However, the adherence to the notion of a nature of war cannot prevent it from also being used as a normative reference point. Bartelson (2017, 12) sums this development up well by calling it a move from the conceptualisation of the nature of war as a "contest between moral and legal equals" to a "contest of unequal parties that by definition cannot be just on both sides".

It seems useful to return to the two analytical implications of a constructivist understanding of the concept of war made at the beginning of this paper: In their attempts to re-conceptualise war, proponents of the New War Thesis attempted to make analytical sense of supposedly new manifestations of war. However, by sticking to the analytical distinction of a nature of war and changing manifestations, they have facilitated the use of the Westphalian-Clausewitzian nature of war as a normative reference point. What practical consequences follow from this? Seeing the new nature of war as a deficiency as opposed to a state of order may legitimise actions aiming "at conserving the international system" (Bartelson 2016, 364). The factors leading to the change in the nature of war need to be eliminated to return to the orderly state and make the Westphalian-Clausewitzian conceptualisation re-gain its analytical value. Kaldor's vision of a cosmopolis (Kaldor 2012, 160) or Münkler's advocacy for world imperium (Münkler 2004, 145) as policy recommendations to deal with new wars may provide a breeding ground for military interventionism in the name of bringing back order to a state of disorder (Newman 2004, 187). Therefore, one may argue that the re-conceptualisation enables a legitimisation of a centralised world monopoly of the use of force or that it is instrumentalised for this purpose (Tönnies 2009). At this point, we may return to the critics of the New Wars Thesis. As already noted, the thesis as such is often questioned, the novelty of the new wars is doubted, and their similarity with pre-Westphalian conflicts stressed. Do the re-conceptualisation attempts even invite a return to the productive view of war reminiscent of pre-Westphalian times (Bartelson 2016; 2017)? Many would certainly prefer to avoid such far-reaching consequences.

Changing Aspirations?

Even if their genesis may be criticised, demands for a new conceptualisation of war should not be ignored. For the very expression of the need for a re-conceptualisation reflects some change, only not in the phenomenon we are trying to explain but in aspirations to understand phenomena. As the critics of the New War Thesis have pointed out, the supposedly new wars today do have historical precedents, some even during the period of the 17th to the 19th century. However, for those past European contemporaries who found analytical clarity in the Westphalian-Clausewitzian conceptualisation of war and for whom it enabled a productive view of war, it was neither necessary, nor desirable, for it to make other forms of war salient. It was sufficient, even convenient, that the conceptualisation on which military practice and European state formation was based had limited analytical reach. Nowadays, however, scholars and policymakers have different demands. After all, the New War Thesis' observations show an increased awareness of political violence's diversity combined with the need to make it analytically accessible (Duyvesteyn and Angstrom 2005). Thus, what is changing and necessitating a re-conceptualisation may not be the historical conditions, but scholars' expectations of what a conceptualisation of war should render analytically intelligible.

Such insight enables a new perspective. For if the empirical comparison with Westphalian times becomes obsolete and we focus more on *our* needs and aspirations today, we no longer need to distinguish ourselves conceptually from Clausewitz. The realisation that formulating a new conceptualisation in relation to the Westphalian-Clausewitzian one is unfruitful since contemporary aspirations are fundamentally different from the past should also set an end to the notion of the nature of war. Overcoming this Clausewitzian mindset means preventing the comparability between a

"new" and an "old" nature of war which otherwise gives way to arguments treating the former as problematic. Accordingly, the question of whether the nature of war is changing will become obsolete. What a new conceptualisation of war that meets contemporary demands will look like remains an open question. It may even be that such a conceptualisation can never exist since concepts are always limiting. Trying to fit the variety of phenomena that we seek to render analytically meaningful in one coherent conceptualisation of war may be impossible and unhelpful. Nevertheless, the idea of conceptual plurality offers food for thought: Why not welcome diversity also on a conceptual level and break away from the claim of an all-encompassing concept of war?

Conclusion

Using a constructivist approach to the concept of war, I have argued that contemporary attempts at re-conceptualising war remain tangled in Westphalian-Clausewitzian thought – thereby not only impeding progression but inviting regression to a productive view of war and its interventionist policy implications. Firstly, the Westphalian state system is taken as an empirical reference point for the claim that contemporary manifestations of war are "new". Such observations led to the perceived need to re-conceptualise war. Second, responding attempts at re-conceptualisation arise in differentiation to the Westphalian-Clausewitzian conceptualisation and adopt the notion of a nature of war. Instead of abandoning this idea altogether, just the claim of its eternity is overcome and a change in the nature of war proclaimed. As the example of Kaldor shows, such a change can manifest itself in the definition of a new inner nature of war as "permanent inconclusive war that spreads across borders" (Kaldor 2010, 275). This, however, enables comparability between the "new" and "old", i.e. the Westphalian-Clausewitzian nature of war, and thus establishes the basis for arguments that take the former as problematic and the latter as normatively superior. Possible implications are military interventionism trying to restore a past orderly state. To prevent this, I have finally attempted to reformulate the need for a new conceptualisation of war as resulting from a change in conceptual needs and ambitions. Such a perspective may enable a complete disengagement from the Westphalian-Clausewitzian conceptualisation of war, thereby preventing problematic consequences and encouraging new conceptual debates.

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