

Are Clausewitz and Sun Tzu Still Relevant in Contemporary Conflicts?

Written by Sarah Miller

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SARAH MILLER, JUL 20 2012

Can Clausewitz and Sun Tzu tell us Anything about Contemporary Conflict?

It is debated whether the teachings of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, two of the most influential war theorists in history, remain relevant to contemporary conflicts. While some say that their thinking is timeless, others argue that the character of war has changed so drastically in recent history that their theories are obsolete. This essay takes the middle ground between these two points of view, and will argue that while both Clausewitz's *On War* and Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* have much to tell us about the unchanging nature of war, Sun Tzu has more to tell us than Clausewitz about the character of contemporary conflicts. This is because Clausewitz' writings are more grounded in the practicalities of his time, which means that modern developments have made them less relevant, while Sun Tzu's writings are more philosophical and make more room for moral questions, which therefore makes them more relevant to the current age. Furthermore, some of Sun Tzu's lessons are particularly applicable to modern developments, and he has a greater normative value in teaching the West how it can adapt its strategic outlook to improve its security and its chances of success in war.

Although contemporary conflicts are, in many ways, very different from those of Clausewitz' and Sun Tzu's times, there is an essence of war that remains unchanged in every era. Clausewitz and Sun Tzu both tried to pinpoint this essence. Clausewitz sees war as a political instrument: "a continuation of political activity by other means" (Clausewitz, 1976), while Sun Tzu sees it less as a political instrument and instead as a necessary evil, as what humans do (Sun Tzu, 1998). Although these concepts seem opposed, they do not necessarily have to be. Sun Tzu is right: war seems to be what humans do, a necessary evil that has persisted despite human progress in many areas. Yet Clausewitz gives insight into why this is the case: to borrow Aristotle's idea, man is by nature a political animal (Aristotle, 1984), and political activity is how we ensure our survival. Conceiving of war as the extreme extension of political activity – as "politics with the shedding of blood" (Mao in Heuser, 2002) is a useful way to explain its persistence.

A second element of Clausewitz' thought that has not lost its relevance is his paradoxical trinity. The nature of war lies at the intersection between the primordial feeling of passion, the realm of probability and chance, and the rational pursuit of a certain purpose (Clausewitz, 1976). Although the secondary trinity of people, military, and government may be limited in its applicability, as some wars do not involve all three elements, the primary trinity is timeless and universally applicable (Heuser, 2002). Passion, probability, and purpose characterize all contemporary conflicts, whether they are civil wars of startling violence in Sierra Leone or Liberia, guerrilla wars and those involving non-state actors such as the war on terrorism, or conventional inter-state wars. The fundamental reasons why people go to war and why they win or lose are explained through this trinity (Mahnken, 2002).

Although both thinkers remain relevant in describing war's unchanging nature, Clausewitz is more limited by his time, and the relevance of some aspects of his thought faces serious challenges from modern developments. For instance, he states that one should maximize enemy casualties and not be deterred by heavy casualties on one's own side (Howard, 1976), and that defeating an enemy "without too much bloodshed ... is a fallacy" (Clausewitz, 1976). In contrast, Sun Tzu's approach to war is more philosophical, and can be interpreted with an eye to the moral issues of

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war. It is especially this morality that makes it relevant to contemporary conflicts. Thus, although *The Art of War* is far older than *On War*, it is actually more applicable to the current age. Sun Tzu says that the ideal victory is without bloodshed: “to subdue the enemy without fighting is the supreme excellence” (Sun Tzu, 1998), and that economic, social, and political tools must be used first, before war is waged as a last resort (Coker, 2003). The way states approach conflict today is in line with this thinking: the developed world is trying to minimize wars both in number and severity, by using international law to limit war’s legality, by using non-military means to achieve political goals whenever possible, and by attempting to humanize conflicts and reduce casualties.

Attempts to monitor and control Saddam Hussein’s weapons program in the 1990s, for example, used diplomatic pressure, sanctions, and inspections. In the aftermath of 9/11, the US took more drastic action and invaded Iraq. But these other channels were used first, and judged to be unsatisfactory. It could be said that a similar approach is being taken against Iran’s supposed nuclear weapons program: diplomatic pressure and sanctions are being used, but among discussions that these tools are not working, there is talk that a military strike (likely by Israel) might be made. Even when war is already decided upon, Sun Tzu’s tactics are used before military action is taken: in Afghanistan, the US bribed warlords and sub-commanders to abandon the Taliban, so the Taliban were dealt a severe blow before actual fighting commenced (Coker, 2003). And during war, we can see that economic, social, and political tools are used alongside military operations: attempts at nation building, through educational and political institutions, for example, are a hallmark of NATO’s involvement in Afghanistan.

Another philosophy where Clausewitz and Sun Tzu seem to be diametrically opposed, and where Sun Tzu retains more relevance today, is absolute victory versus managing risk. Although Clausewitz recognizes that the outcome of war is not always final, because the defeated state may view the outcome as a transitory evil that it can remedy in the future (Clausewitz, 1976), his solution to this problem is attaining decisive victory to an extent where the enemy is unable to seek revenge. In contrast, Sun Tzu advocates preserving the enemy’s state and military (Coker, 2003) and says, “the object of war cannot be total security, which requires the total defeat of the enemy, only a better kind of insecurity” (Coker, 2003). Arguably, decisive victory is no longer possible in the wars that are being fought today, which are often not against a single military force, but extensive and varying networks, such as Al-Qaeda. Furthermore, aiming at decisive victory over these forces could be counterproductive, as it breeds more resentment and anger in their recruiting populations. As General McChrystal says, using excessive force alienates the population (2009), and the goal is to win their support. Therefore Sun Tzu’s concepts of managing insecurity and preserving the enemy seem to be better advice than decisive victory and total destruction of the enemy.

Additionally, Sun Tzu’s lessons of the importance of intelligence and the virtues of winning in the dark (Coker, 2003) seem to characterize the war on terrorism. Intelligence gathering, although not so much in the human form that Sun Tzu supported as through technology, is how the West has attempted to know the enemy, and how it has been able to prevent terrorist attacks. From the perspective of the other side, it could be said that the fact that many terrorists live in countries like the UK, the Netherlands, and the US enables them to know the enemy as well. Furthermore, the idea of winning in the dark is very pertinent, as the public does not know about many successes in the war on terrorism. Contrasting these principles with Clausewitz’ promotion of the great battle and of courage in military leaders, it seems that Sun Tzu is more in line with the current age.

Furthermore, some of Sun Tzu’s lessons have a normative value in showing the West how it could change its strategies to achieve greater success in war. It is widely accepted that Clausewitz represents traditional military strategy in the West, while Sun Tzu has mainly been the source of strategy for non-Western societies (McCready, 2003). But the West could learn more from Sun Tzu. For example, his argument that the diplomatic and political context can determine whether you win or lose can be applied to Israel’s defeat in its counterterrorist operations in 2002 (and arguably in general), and US defeat in Vietnam (McCready, 2003). Although Israel and the US were militarily far superior, and they won the military battles, they lost the wars (partly) because they lost them in propaganda and psychological terms. They were viewed internationally as bullies, and the US suffered a massive loss of support at home (McCready, 2003). Thus it could be argued that it would serve the strategic interests of the West and especially the US to move away from emphasizing military superiority, and instead pay more attention to the non-military aspects of strategy, which are discussed in *The Art of War*.

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In conclusion, both Clausewitz and Sun Tzu have important insights to offer in explaining war's unchanging essence and its continued presence in human life. However, Sun Tzu has much to tell us about how wars are and should be fought today, while Clausewitz' contribution to this discussion of contemporary conflicts is more limited, and his thoughts are tied to the way wars were fought in his time. Sun Tzu has more to offer both in the discussions about the role of war in today's world, and how it can be limited and avoided, as well as the strategies and tactics that can be usefully employed in contemporary wars. This timelessness arguably comes from Sun Tzu's more philosophical approach, in which he saw war as a necessary but evil cause of disharmony in the universe. This idea has resonance with today's ethical debates about whether war can be prevented, and if not, how it should be waged.

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