

The Enduring Wisdom of Sun Tzu and Clausewitz

Written by Brad Smith

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BRAD SMITH, JUN 15 2010

‘What enduring lessons about the conduct of war can we still learn from the works of Sun Tzu and Clausewitz?’

Introduction

Technology has drastically changed the speed and lethality of warfare. Today, a US Air Force Combat Controller or Marine Corps Forward Air Controller has the capability to identify a target with his portable laptop and have an aircraft “cleared hot” to drop any array of surgically precise ordinance on target within a matter of minutes. The efficiency and lethality of network centric warfare has revolutionized combat from the days of cavalries and catapults. But have these technological developments fundamentally changed the nature of war? For centuries, warfighters, politicians and military analysts alike have reverted to the great texts of Sun Tzu and Carl von Clausewitz for profound insight into the nature and conduct of war. For Clausewitz, war is not simply a ‘chameleon’ that can change its outward appearance, rather commanders must recognize that war changes its internal composition. Critics, such as Michael Ignatieff, argue that current conflicts have entered into a postmodern structure whereas nuclear weapons, economic integration and technology have made war a ‘spectator sport’, rendering Clausewitz’s ideas of the composition of war obsolete.[1] Many commanders and pundits alike, however, argue that, while some tactics have changed, both Sun Tzu and Clausewitz offer enduring insights into the nature and conduct of war. This essay will assess the relevance of the principles developed in *On War* and *The Art of War* to the conduct of war by International Security Assistance Forces in Afghanistan, contrasting the resilient lessons of each philosopher in modern combat. The result is solidified in the idea that war is dynamic -a dialogue that is malleable to whatever will is imposed on it- yet there are universal characteristics of war that are pervasive across time and culture.

Conception of War

Sun Tzu and Clausewitz both maintain very different definitions of war. Handel points out that this divergence in definition is a result of their disparate approach towards levels of analysis.[2] Clausewitz’s view of war is limited by context to that of the commander on the battlefield; acting within the resources and circumstances he is granted by the state. In his broadest conception, Clausewitz states that “war is nothing but a continuation of political intercourse, with a mixture of other means.”[3] Thus, Clausewitz elucidates the inherent subordination of the warfighter to the politician. The role of the Commander in Chief as a civilian, for example, places political wills above strategic directives. That the “unique political situation is the context that bounds the system constituted by a given war” is still very prevalent in modern war.[4] The strict limitation of ground forces to clandestine CIA operatives and UAV strikes in Pakistan’s lawless boarder regions exemplifies the political characteristics of the international arena that supersede strategy in war. Clausewitz also offers salient insight into what he sees as the essence of war – combat. Beyerchen argues that Clausewitz sees the manifestation of war as fundamentally nonlinear, a clash between two living forces each attempting to impose their will on the other. War is therefore a dynamic set of patterns, a chaotic wrestling match that floats amongst three poles: 1) the blind natural force of violence, 2) chance and 3) the rational subordination to the policy of government.[5] Beyerchen utilizes the analogy of entropy to describe the manner in which the interaction between animate objects yield unpredictability. This conception is crucial to the understanding of the enemies tactics in Afghanistan. The United States and its allies wield overwhelming force and unsurpassed technological dominance on the battlefield. As a result, an equilibrating force is simply not deployable by the Taliban.

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Rather, the terrorist organization reverts to limited engagement and subversive tactics; a far cry from Clausewitz's positive claims to the nature of warfare, but a testament to the discourse inherent in war.

Handel points out that Sun Tzu's conception of warfare is much broader and "primarily concerned with the conduct of war on the highest strategic level." [6] Sun Tzu's seamless link between diplomacy and war allows him to advocate a method of full spectrum warfare, what he calls "total war". Total war, in the eyes of Sun Tzu, allows one to defeat their enemy in a bloodless manner, focusing strategy on the economic, social and political defeat of the enemy. [7] This conception of war has been adopted by NATO and ISAF commanders in Afghanistan. Realizing the importance of winning the will of the people in neglecting Taliban safe harbour, ISAF has shifted from a strict combat role in the region towards nation building efforts that entail the development of resilient political and economic institutions. As a result, the eradication of poppy fields, a vital source of funding for the Taliban, has become a central strategic goal of ISAF.

Strategy

Clausewitz's states the first principle of strategy is that "superiority of numbers admittedly is the most important factor in the outcome of an engagement... It thus follows that as many troops as possible should be brought into the engagement at the decisive point." [8] However, this principle has generally not been embraced within the first war of the 21st century. Rather, it can be said that the strategy in Afghanistan has contradicted Clausewitz's principle of overwhelming force. Aspects of the Revolution in Military Affairs and technological advances in network centric warfare have allowed a small group of special operations units to effectively implement an overwhelming level of firepower in the battlespace. However, this idea of neo-limited war is only partially true. Technology has changed the conduct but not the nature of strategy; while the antiquated idea of superiority in numbers is not applicable to Afghanistan, Clausewitz's underlying idea, the superiority of force, has certainly been adopted in Afghanistan. The number of air assets, from B1-B, B-2, B-52, F/A 18, Predator Drones, AC-130 Gunships and Apache Gunships, elucidates the overwhelming air superiority of ISAF forces in Afghanistan. Additionally, the special operation forces on the ground utilize force multiplication through the acquisition of indigenous assets such as the Northern Alliance. Thus, the Clausewitzian principle of superiority in numbers has been maintained in spirit on the ground and in the skies above Afghanistan.

Where Clausewitzian strategy has recently gone astray is in the implementation of the deliberate attack on the enemies "center of gravity." Echevarria argue that the United States Military has increasingly implemented the center of gravity into its doctrine over the past decade. [9] Sidoti notes that the center of gravity was swiftly located and destroyed in both Iraq and Afghanistan within several days, suggesting extremely effective implementation of this Clausewitzian principle. [10] However, the entropic and dialectical nature of war has meant that that center has now shifted for the Taliban. The terrorist group has relocated its center of operations to the North Western Frontier Province of Pakistan where the Pakistani government has emplaced significant restrictions impeding combat operations in the region. Once again, it is seen that the political context of war limits the implementation of strategy.

Sun Tzu's insights into strategy are perhaps even more applicable to recent developments in Afghanistan, however. Whereas Clausewitz argues for swift victory through the implementation of superior numbers, Sun Tzu sees the achievement of limited warfare through full spectrum warfare. He sees that utilizing economic, social and political means to fight wars engenders a bloodless victory. General Stanley McChrystal's recent Tactical Directive for ISAF troops in Afghanistan lays out the new paramount operational imperative as "gaining and maintaining... ..the will and support of the population." [11] McChrystal argues that excessive use of force "alienates the population." As a result, he directs ground commanders to limit close air support (CAS) and all other indirect fire, opting for a stringent analysis of potential collateral damage to residential neighborhoods and civilian casualties. Further emphasizing Sun Tzu's principle of limited warfare, McChrystal has mandated that all house entries will be done by the Afghan National Army, embodying Sun Tzu's idea of "winning in the dark." [12] Thus, McChrystal has shifted the strategic focus in Afghanistan from a Clausewitzian strategy of overwhelming force to one that embodies that the Taoist canon of Sun Tzu, opting for social and political victory over pure battlespace dominance.

Nature of War

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The War in Afghanistan proves that the nature of warfare is unchanging. In Clausewitz's analogy that derives from the science of physics, he lays out the manner in which entropy manifests itself in warfare: friction. "Everything in war is simple" Clausewitz notes, "but the simple is difficult." [13] Friction is the "entropy" in the system that inevitably impedes and distorts even the simplest of plans. As a result, information is not linear on the battlefield. As it was in the ancient battles of the Peloponnesian War, and the Napoleonic Wars of Clausewitz's time, it is today that no amount of training and discipline can fully prepare an army for the chaos that prevails on the battlefield. Friction is pervasive in Afghanistan. The extremely violent topography and limited support facilities to forward operating bases have proved deadly for the highly trained special operations units of the United States Military. A prime example is seen during "Operation Red Wing" when Afghan goat herders encountered a team of four US Navy SEALs on a reconnaissance mission in the Kunar Province of Afghanistan. Due to rules of engagement, the SEALs were forced to let the herders pass unscathed. The herders quickly alerted local insurgents to the SEALs' presence and in the ensuing battle over 100 insurgents encircled their position. The fog of war set in as a rescue attempt was made via Blackhawk helicopters. Communications cut out, bearings were lost and the helicopters fell into an RPG ambush. All 16 SEALs and Army pilots onboard were killed. Even with the technological advances of SatCom radios, GPS and night vision goggles, the friction in war is an inevitable and pervasive attribute.

Victory

Both Clausewitz and Sun Tzu offer compelling insight into the conception and achievement of victory. The protracted conflict in Afghanistan has tested leader's abilities to define victory, ranging from defeat of the Taliban to enhanced security in the region. For Clausewitz, tactical victory is absolute. Battles end with a single vanquished loser and an empowered victor. Thus, war ends with "the compulsory submission of the enemy to our will." [14] This sort of victory is unattainable, however, in a counter-insurgency. Clausewitz notes that war is never absolute, rather "the conquered state often sees in it only a passing evil, which may be repaired in after times by means of political combination." [15] Even the most overwhelming victories, espousing unrivaled superiority in power, cannot ingrain a resilient defeat. This is truly the case in Afghanistan where President Obama's recent commitment to a withdrawal timeline has assured the Taliban that any defeat they may suffer on the battlefield is fleeting.

Sun Tzu, on the other hand, fears the repercussions of the absolute, violent Clausewitzian victory. Securing victory only begets more victory he argues, making escalation the nature of war's dialectic. Thus, Sun Tzu argues that victory must be made "in the dark" as to limit the ambition of leaders and the irrational will of the people. The proliferation of embedded journalists and video cameras on the battlefield has certainly complicated this principle in the modern age. Yet, military commanders have been careful to protect the victories of their "silent warriors." While conventional battles are well documented in the press, little is heard from the special operations and CIA victories in places like Waziristan, Somalia and Yemen.

Conclusion

Despite the extremely advanced technologies and tactics utilized by today's conventional militaries, crucial principles of war are resilient throughout time and cultures. Both Clausewitz and Sun Tzu provide excellent insight into these characteristics, but their disparate levels of analysis result in different prescriptions for action. Clausewitz's theory is couched in the 19th century battlefield tactics of the Napoleonic Wars and therefore favors wielding superior numbers in direct combat against the enemy's center of gravity. In contrast, Sun Tzu's Taoist framework utilizes a broader conceptualization of war. As a result, Sun Tzu advocates swift victory through bloodless, limited warfare. By limiting ambition, full spectrum warfare, incorporating political, social and economic aspects, creates a more effective and resilient victory, changing both the enemies will and ability to fight back. Despite these disparate conceptions of war, both philosophers still maintain significant influence on the tactics of warfighters today. As a result, the strategic directive of ISAF in Afghanistan can be seen as an amalgam of the insight of both philosophers. At times when the battlefield seems more conventional, Clausewitz's ideas are more pervasive in ISAF doctrine. When the insurgents revert to guerilla tactics that jeopardize the will of the population, the more subversive and limited tactics of Sun Tzu are adopted. Clausewitz and Sun Tzu have both shown that war is unpredictable and nonlinear. Despite its chaotic nature, their ideas on the nature, strategy and victory of war are evermore relevant to today's conflicts.

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[1] Angstrom, J. *Rethinking the Nature of War* p. 17

[2] Handel, M. *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought* p. 31

[3] Clausewitz, Carl von *On War* p. 357

[4] Beyerchen. Alan "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Unpredictability of War." P. 59

[5] *Ibid.* p. 69

[6] Handel, M. *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought*. p. 33

[7] Coker, C. "What Would Sun Tzu Say about the War on Terrorism?" p. 18

[8] Clausewitz, Carl von *On War* p. 161

[9] Echevarria II, A. "Clausewitz's Centre of Gravity: Changing our warfighting doctrine again!"

[10] Sidoti, Capt Anthony F. "The Relevance of Carl Von Clausewitz in Operation Iraqi Freedom." P. 2

[11] McChrystal, Stanley. "Tactical Directive." p. 1

[12] Coker, C. "What Would Sun Tzu Say about the War on Terrorism?" p. 20

[13] Clausewitz, Carl von *On War* p. 66

[14] Clausewitz, Carl von *On War* p. 6

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[15] Clausewitz, Carl von *On War* p. 12

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*Written by: **Brad Smith***

*University/organisation: **London School of Economics***

*Written for: **Professor Christopher Coker***

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