

Is Clausewitz relevant to modern warfare politics essay



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The students of international relations and strategic studies seek from Clausewitz not a theory of politics but an analysis of war. For some 150 years those who have sought to understand war have turned to Clausewitz- to explain the logic behind wars or to condemn its applicability to modern warfare. Carl Von Clausewitz's concern with war was both practical and theoretical. A life-long soldier, he first put on Prussian uniform in 1792 at the age of twelve and saw action against France in the following year.

Consequently, he took part in the campaigns against Napoleon, rose to the rank of Major General and was still soldiering when he died in 1831. Though ambitious in his military career and dissatisfied with his achievement, Clausewitz's passionate interest in war also took an intellectual form. From his early twenties he studied and wrote about war, leaving for publication after his death seven volumes of military history and the eight books which constitute *On War*[1].

Clausewitz's masterpiece of warfare, *On War*, has been much scrutinized[2]. Many critics have pointed to Clausewitz's preoccupation with armies and the control of territory- ' albeit the principal instruments and stakes of warfare in continental Europe in his time- and to his neglect of sea-power and the related questions of colonies, trade and empire'[3]. Some have criticized Clausewitz's lack of concern for logistics, his focus on combat at the expense of preparations for war[4]. Others have pointed out that perhaps unavoidably, he has little to say about the impact of technology on war, thereby raising the question of whether his analysis remains relevant to modern warfare[5]. Criticisms has also been directed at the unclear, even inconsistent ideas that run through *On War*, a defect which Clausewitz

acknowledged in a note written in 1827 dealing with his plans for revision of the work. More fundamentally, Clausewitzian scholars have examined the strengths and weakness of his epistemology: his concept of ‘ absolute war’, his approach to historical relativism, his ideas on the relationship between theory and praxis and his attempt to develop ‘ critical analysis’ for ‘ the application of theoretical truths to actual events’[6].

However, most proponents of Clausewitz are agreed that one of his greatest contributions, if not the greatest, lies in the attention paid to the idea that war must be understood in its political context. This idea was not new, in simplistic form it was something of a commonplace by the end of the eighteenth century, but Clausewitz developed and expanded it. He was, Paret argues, the first theorist of war to make politics an essential part of his analysis[7].

For Clausewitz war is ‘ only a branch of political activity, an activity which is in no sense autonomous’[8]. War could be understood only in its political context and it is therefore in politics that the origins of war are to be found. Politics in Clausewitz’s words “ is the womb in which war develops, where its outlines already exist in their hidden rudimentary form, like the characteristics of living creatures in their embryos”[9]. After Clausewitz it would be always difficult to think of war as something apart from politics. This is not the place to pursue Clausewitz’s analysis of war. In fact, this essay intends to critically analyze Clausewitz’s relevance for understanding contemporary patterns and dynamics of warfare.

By the end of the Cold War, onwards, the literature focusing on strategic studies has highlighted transformational changes within international system, therefore altering the very nature of war. As a result many security studies scholars have repudiated traditional theories of strategic thought. Clausewitzian theory, in particular has taken a lot of criticism, regarding its relevance to modern warfare. As Paul Hirst notes, ' we are living in a period when the prevailing political and economic structures are widely perceived not merely to be changing but subject to radical transformation'[10].

In this ' new' era it is broadly accepted that the political and economic forces reshaping international relations are causing equally profound changes in the nature and conduct of war. Moreover, since the end of the Cold War, speculation about a future not set neatly by parameters of the East/West stand-off has resulted in varied interpretations of both present and future. Would it be a radically different world to that which passed? What would replace the Cold War rivalry? What would define international relations (IR) as it entered a new millennium?

Of course, in the immediate aftermath of the ' West's' Cold War victory, Francis Fukuyama, with his famous book, *The end of History*, heralded the triumph of capitalism over communism as confirmation that the world has entered an age free from antagonisms of ideology and that now ' the Western Liberalism held the trump card as the global cure to war, inequality and domestic insecurity'[11].

The western freedom and democratic values underpin the notion that ' globalization' of world politics driven by economic and liberal principles, has

become one of the main features of contemporary international politics. It is widely accepted that these changes are also affecting the nature of war.

The argument that the state, hitherto, the central actor in international system- is in terminal decline, has stimulated claims that war in 21st century is undergoing profound change. It has even been argued that globalization forces, hereby economic interdependence and a rising intolerance to the horrors of conflict- resulting from a Revolution in Attitudes towards the Military (RAM)[12], has produced an era in which war between the major states is obsolete[13]. With the split of Soviet Russia and the victory of the West, in the early 1990s, political commentators such as Michael Mandelbaum were claiming that the trend towards obsolescence had accelerated[14]. He even recommended that ' the rising cost of war and the diminishing expectations of victory's benefits, have transformed its status'[15]. In short, major war was thought to be a thing of the past.

Furthermore, when war takes place it has been argued that it will differ fundamentally from the rest of strategic history; it is even claimed that the nature of war itself is changing. For supporters of this view, war has ceased to be a political and rational undertaking. Consequently, the claim is made that new ways of comprehending war's modern dynamics are required to cope with political, cultural and technological transformation[16]. Relevant to that, is the idea of ' new war', which has done most to undermine traditional ideas about the nature of war. Attacking the traditional position propounded by Clausewitz, that ' war is the continuation of policy', the new war idea focuses on changes in the international system enthused by globalization- mainly the ostensible decline of the state. As new war proponents believe

Clausewitzian theory is conterminous with the state, they repudiate his work as a result. However, the debate between these competing ideas has been ongoing since early 1990s without definitive answer as to which offers the greatest success of understanding patterns and dynamics of modern warfare.

This research essay will reevaluate the relevance of Clausewitz's war methods and assess its viability in contemporary warfare.

While the new war argument is diverse, its primary claim is that modern conflict differs from its historical antecedents in three major ways: a) structure; b) methods; and c) motives, each element interpenetrate the other[17]. Moreover, though what is now termed the new war thesis is in fact a collection of different ideas about war in the modern world, the notion of a new, emergent type of warfare has been primarily attributed to scholars and practitioners such as William S. Lind, Martin van Creveld and Mary Kaldor, among others[18].

Like fellow advocates, Lind argues that the wars in the future will be different from the past because, according to him, globalization process has declined the role of the state as the main actor. His argument focuses on his concept of fourth-generation warfare (4GW), which Lind claims is part of an historical development that has already produced first, second, and third generation war. Although attention is now focused on 4GW, it is only a step towards the fifth, sixth and seventh generations of warfare at some point in the future. This irregular mode of conflict is believed to be a return to the way war worked before the state monopolized violence[19].

Lind's 4GW analysis starts from the Peace of Westphalia (1648), when the state monopolized mass violence.

The First Generation of War (1648-1860) was one of line and column- battle was perceived to be orderly and there was an increasingly clear distinction between combatant and civilian[20].

The Second Generation of War addressed mass firepower first encountered in the Great War (1914-1918) by maintaining order despite the increased indirect destructiveness of artillery fire. Mass firepower inflicted huge damage on the enemy, followed by the advance of infantry[21].

Third Generation War was developed from 1916-18. Exemplified by the Blitzkrieg of the German Army in the opening campaigns of World War 2, third generation war is based on speed rather than attrition and firepower. The primary emphasis is to attack the enemy's rear areas and 'collapse him from the rear forward'. For advocates of this idea, despite the high tempo, technologically dominated 'effects' based warfare practiced by the richest modern armies, contemporary state/military structures encapsulate and practice third generation war. For many, this is precisely why victory in modern war appears so elusive. Colonel Thomas X. Hammes of the US Marine Corps explains:

" Fourth generation warfare (4GW) uses all available networks- political, economic, social and military- to convince the enemy's political decision makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit. It is an evolved form of insurgency. Still rooted in the fundamental precept that superior political will, when properly employed, <https://assignbuster.com/is-clausewitz-relevant-to-modern-warfare-politics-essay/>

can defeat greater economic and military power, 4GW makes use of society's networks to carry on its fight... Fourth generation wars are lengthy-measured in decades rather than months or years"[22]

A new type of emergent warfare is also envisaged by Martin van Creveld, who claims that the state power is declining and as a result the traditional structures of International Relations are eroding. Van Creveld predicts that a breakdown of political legitimacy will transform war from a rational pursuit of states into irrational, unstructured activity-fought not by armies but by groups with varying motivations. In addition to that, he argues that war will lose its political purpose. Instead it will be driven by ' a mixture of religious fanaticism, culture, ethnicity, or technology'[23]. By claiming that the war has lost its political purpose, Van Creveld, offers a challenge to Clausewitzian model of warfare. Clausewitz argues that despite wars' violent predicaments, it is bound by political objectives and that war should be fought for rational pursuit of political goals. As he mentions clearly: ' the political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it and mans can never be considered in isolation from their purpose[24]. The idea that political objectivity encapsulates all aspects of warfare is thought to have been accumulated and presented in Clausewitz's ' Remarkable Trinity'. The concept of Clausewitzian Trinity continues to incite controversy. Indeed, the idea that the nature of military conflict has changed originated directly from the debate about the contemporary relevance of the Trinity in understanding the patterns and dynamics of modern warfare. Clausewitz wrote that:

" War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to a given case. As a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always

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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 it subject to reason alone"[25].

He continues:

“ The first of these three aspects mainly concerns the people; the second the commander and his army; the third the government. The passions that are to be kindled in a war must already be inherent in the people; the scope which play of courage and talent will enjoy in the realm of probability and chance depends on the particular character of the army; but the political aims are the business of government alone"[26].

By associating the ' Trinity' to sections of society, many scholars have assumed that the concept is fundamentally linked to the state. Creveld's argument that a new type of war is emerging rests with the fact that there has been a decline in the number of inter-state conflicts and that there has been a subsequent rise in the number of wars within states. For Creveld, the proliferation of Low Intensity Conflict (LIC) in conflicts within states is evident that Clausewitzian Trinity concept no longer represents a coherent explanation why war is a rational instrument of the state. This is because with the end of the state and therefore the international system of states (in this case the decline of the state by globalization forces), only violent and non-Trinitarian, non-political war will remain[27].

Intertwined with changes in the structure of contemporary conflict is the argument that war's distinctive character, of a confrontation between opposing armies, has been replaced. The argument runs, just as the structure of war has changed so too have the methods; modern wars rarely follow conventional norms and are thought to be of distinctive nature by their sheer brutality and lack of strategic rationality. The increasing use of irregular warfare by terrorist organizations and globally incremented civilians claims to loosen the historical bond between state and military, thus giving credibility to the claim that state war between recognizable belligerents is a thing of the past- ' a post-Clausewitzian approach is therefore an immediate requirement'[28]. As this trend develops traditional armies will become increasingly like their enemies in order to tackle the threat that this poses. According to Creveld, ' armies will be replaced by police-like security forces on the one hand and bands of ruffians on the other'[29].

Following the claims of both Lind's and Creveld's theses, war in the former Yugoslavia, Caucasus and throughout Africa seemed to substantiate their claims with much needed evidence. Mary Kaldor, the chief proponent of new war, has even claimed that ' the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina has become the archetypal example, the paradigm of the new type of warfare'[30]. These conflicts do appear to manifest irrational traits and they often seem to be guided by factors other than governmental policy. As such, it has become common for most commentators and theorists openly to envisage a world where ' conventional armies cannot function properly against a new type of enemy. It is predicted that this trend will continuously develop and the feared result is an overspill of unorganized violence from the developing

world. Kaldor, perhaps the best known of the new war advocates, explains the difference inherent in new wars:

“ In contrast to the vertically organized hierarchical units that were typical of ‘ old wars’, the units that fight these wars include a disparate range of different types of groups such as paramilitary units, local warlords, criminal gangs, police forces, mercenary groups and also regular armies including breakaway units of regular armies. In organizational terms, they are highly decentralized and they operate through a mixture of confrontation and cooperation even when on opposing sides”[31].

Throughout the 1990s, wars in Balkans, Caucasus and Africa propelled the idea of Transformative change in International Relations. Advocated by Robert Kaplan’s provocative thesis *The Coming Anarchy*, it is argued that the global economic inequality, combined with stabilizing effects of failed states are the primary danger awaiting the modern world- especially when ‘ factions’ resort to communal violence in order to restore ‘ group’ security. For Kaplan, the implications necessitate analysis of, ‘ the whole question of war’[32]. Furthermore, he mirrors Creveld’s position; he too rejects the Clausewitzian argument that war is governed by politics. Like other ‘ new war’ writers, Kaplan warns that a preponderance of ‘ high-tech’ weapons is useless in a world where ‘ conventional’ war is outmoded. He cautions, ‘ something far more terrible awaits us’[33].

War will not be characterized by the large-scale industrial confrontations of the twentieth century, or be subject to any notion of legality; there will be no rules of war as understood today. Rather, the primary target in new wars is

the civilian population. If the present conflict in Iraq is any measure, attacking civilians has become the tactic of choice for the non-state actors operating there. According to the Brookings Institute's 'Iraq Index', the figures for civilian deaths during conflict are even more telling. From March 2003 until June 2006, the index estimates the total number of civilian fatalities as a result of conflict at 151, 000[34].

Certainly, the recent experiences of the United States and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan appear to suggest a trend towards difficult irregular warfare. These examples seem to compound the argument that future war will be asymmetrical, at least on one side[35].

Some commentators, have even suggested that using the term 'war' at all, gives it a credibility that belies its unorganized character[36]. After all, these 'new internal wars' do not manifest military objectives; at least, not ones we are used to seeing[37]. According to Kalevi Holsti:

"War has become de-institutionalized in the sense of central control, rules, regulations, etiquette and armaments. Armies are rag-tag groups frequently made up of teenagers paid in drugs, or not paid at all. In the absence of authority and discipline, but quite in keeping with the interests of the warlords, 'soldiers' discover opportunities for private enterprises of their own"[38].

Rupert Smith, a retired top British general with direct experience of war in Balkans, Northern Ireland and the Middle East, goes even further, claiming that:

“ War no longer exists. Confrontation, conflict and combat undoubtedly exist all around the world- most noticeably, but not only, in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Palestinian Territories- and states still have armed forces which they use as symbols of power. None the less, war as cognitively known to most non-combatants, war as battle in a field between men and machinery, war as a massive deciding event in a dispute in international affairs: such war no longer exists”[39].

For new war advocates, globalization’s pervasive nature stimulates dissonance between those able to play a part in a globalized world, and those who are not. As Mark Duffield argues:

‘ The changing competence of the nation-state is reflected in the shift from hierarchical patterns of government to the wider and more polyarchial networks, contracts and partnerships of governance’[40].

It is an opinion championed by Kaldor, who claims the process of globalization is tearing up the previously stable state system- a system which for many has provided a starting point for understanding war and its role in international relations system[41]. Consequently, she too rejects the Clausewitzian Paradigm[42]. Like other ‘ new war’ commentators, Kaldor believes the pervasive nature of globalization is the root cause of modern political instability and war. As globalization erodes the state system, there will be a parallel trend highlighting an increase in identity politics. Just as there has been a change in structure and methods so too are there changes in the motivations of modern war. With socially ostracized communities unable to express their political grievances, it is thought they will employ

war as the most attractive expression of their local cultural/religious needs[43]. To grab power, this process is supported by political elites[44].

Several studies into the economies of new wars suggest that 'greed' plays a large role in contemporary civil conflict[45]. They also agree that the economic element found in new wars is directly linked to why the distinction between war and peace has become blurred[46]. For Mark Duffield, 'war is no longer a Clausewitzian affair of state; it is a problem of underdevelopment and political breakdown'[47].