

Clausewitz and Sun Tzu

Paradigms of warfare in the 21st century

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Despite ideal-typical theoretical constructions, every war is characterized by a combination of irreconcilable opposites. Consequently, the question is neither about an 'either-or' nor about a pure 'both-and,' but involves the question which strategy is the appropriate one in a concrete situation. In order to avoid the continuous invention of new ways of warfare, it is necessary to reflect on the approaches of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu. The foundational nature of their works invites us to focus on fundamental and enduring trends. Sun Tzu seemed to have the upper hand after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, but since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 Clausewitz is coming back to the fore. This raises the question which of the two, Clausewitz or Sun Tzu, will be referred to more in the strategic debates of the future. In my view this depends on the role that 'thought' and the 'soul' will play in comparison to material realities in a globalized world.



'No principle in the world is always right, and no thing is always wrong. What was used yesterday may be rejected today, what is rejected now may be used later on. This use or disuse has no fixed right or wrong. To avail yourself of opportunities at just the right time, responding to events without being set in your ways is in the domain of wisdom. If your wisdom is insufficient (...) you'll come to an impasse wherever you go.' – Taoistic text¹

were transformed into intervention forces against non-state actors while, with the current war in Ukraine, state-to-state war has returned and may determine the next thirty years.

To cope with these developments, we need to reflect on the approaches of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu. Clausewitz experienced a renaissance with the Iraq War in 1991, was laid to rest again after that war in 2003 and replaced by Sun Tzu's concepts, and with the war in Ukraine, Clausewitz is coming back to the fore. The foundational nature of their works invites us to focus on fundamental and enduring trends. The

In times of accelerated change in warfare it is necessary to reflect on the fundamentals, otherwise with every new development a new kind of warfare will be invented (New Wars, RMA, hybrid warfare, 4th and 5th generation warfare, the OODA loop). A striking example could be that after the Cold War most armies

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1 Thomas Cleary, quoting a Taoist story, in: Sun Tzu, *The Art of War. Spirituality for Conflict* (Woodstock, 2008) p. XVI.



American military trainers in Ukraine, 2016: After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 Clausewitz has come back to the fore

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fact that they were written in ignorance of current technological and social conditions can help us to see them in their true proportions. Clausewitz, in particular, recognized that the conduct of war is deeply rooted in immediate (but ever-changing) circumstances. He would have been the last to argue that such things did not matter. But he also recognized that they were not the only factors that matter. Striking a balance is a central challenge of strategic theory at all times, including ours.²

This is perhaps the crucial difference with more recent approaches, which run the risk of absolutizing a limited development. Both Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, on the other hand, were convinced that war consists of paradoxical, contradictory tendencies (Clausewitz, for one, believed in the 'wondrous trinity'). This creates a dilemma between the 'grammar' of war and its definition as an instrument of politics. Clausewitz clearly states, on the one hand, that war consists of violence, to be regarded as a blind natural force, and, on the other hand, that war is subordinate to pure reason. This is the decisive conflict in any war and creates a dilemma of action. Ethical theory tells us how to deal with dilemmas. One way is to impose a hierarchy between the conflicting tendencies, as has been attempted in the concept of trinitarian warfare by Harry G. Summers and Martin van Creveld, which is not identical with Clausewitz's 'wondrous trinity' but even contradicts it.³ The other approach is to draw a line between e.g. non-state wars and wars between states – one principle would apply to non-state wars (e.g. Robert Kaplan, John Keegan, van Creveld), the other to wars between states. Yet another

approach would be a kind of functional differentiation, which typifies all modern armies and is best characterized by the function of the organs of a body. There is also an holistic approach in which it is not political leadership but an overarching political purpose that determines all concrete actions. We find such a concept especially in partisan warfare, network-centric warfare; to sum up, networks are bound together by such an holistic approach. Finally, Clausewitz's concept of a floating and evolving balance of opposites, as well as Sun Tzu's consideration of paradoxes, must be taken into account when dealing with dilemmas of action.

The discursive abandonment of state war and its replacement by concepts of 'new wars'⁴ or non-state wars⁵ in the 1990s was not superficially wrong, but it obscured the view of longer-term developments. This creates a paradox. On the one hand, the impression that there would only be wars of intervention had become established in the political discourse; on the other hand, the newer approaches to warfare and the new technological possibilities gave the impression that there would be purely military solutions to political problems – with fatal consequences in Afghanistan and Iraq, for example. We should not dogmatically decide which of the two is better suited to deal with war and violence in a world of hybrid globalization characterized by revolutionary technological developments and the 'rise of the other'.⁶ What remains completely open is the relationship between influencing the mind of the enemy and the role of material conditions in future warfare. Here, Clausewitz and Sun Tzu may serve as cautionary tales against absolutizing either side.

In the first part of this article, the development of the discourse on Clausewitz and Sun Tzu since the end of the Cold War is explained. It then discusses some of Sun Tzu's principles and problems, especially his famous dictum that war is won by those who do not have to fight. This statement may perhaps serve as the best description of the goal of hybrid warfare. Clausewitz's concept of the floating balance of opposites in warfare will then be explained in

2 Andres Herberg-Rothe, 'Clausewitz's Concept of Strategy. Balancing Purpose, Aims and Means', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Volume 37, 6-7 (2014) pp. 903-925. See: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01402390.2013.853175>.

3 Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz's Puzzle. The Political Theory of War* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007).

4 Mary Kaldor, *Neue und alte Kriege. Organisierte Gewalt im Zeitalter der Globalisierung* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 2000); Herfried Münkler, *Die neuen Kriege* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, Rowohlt, 2002).

5 Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York, The Free Press, 1991); Robert D. Kaplan, *Warrior Politics* (New York, Vintage Books, 2002).

6 Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York, W.W. Norton, 2012).



detail and some applications will be made. I will then argue that, although Clausewitz and Sun Tzu advocate diametrically opposed principles, we must be aware that their positions are integrated into a field of polar opposites between which we must find a balance.

The discourse about Clausewitz and Sun Tzu

Every war has its own strategy and also its own theorist. In fact, there are only two great theorists of war and warfare, the Prussian ‘philosopher of war’ Carl von Clausewitz and the ancient Chinese theorist of the ‘art of war’, Sun Tzu. Nevertheless, there is no single strategy, neither Clausewitz’s nor Sun Tzu’s, that applies equally to all cases. Often an explanation for success or failure is sought in the strategies used only in retrospect. For example, Harry G. Summers attributed the defeat of the United States in the Vietnam War to the failure to take into account the unity of people, army and government, Clausewitz’s ‘wondrous trinity.’⁷ In contrast, after the successful campaign against Iraq in 1991, the then Chief-of-Staff of the U.S. Army, Colin Powell, appeared at a press gathering with Clausewitz’s *Book of War* as if to show what was learned from the mistakes of the Vietnam War and that the Iraq War was won relying on Clausewitz.⁸ Similarly, after World War I, there was a discourse that amounted to the afterthought that if the German generals had read Clausewitz correctly, the war would not have been lost. This position referred to the victory in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 and the assessment of the then Chief of the

General Staff, Helmut von Moltke, that he was able to fight this war successfully by having studied Clausewitz’s *On War*. Since then, Clausewitz’s book has been perused for finding reasons for victory or defeat.⁹

If Clausewitz’s status seemed unchallenged after the Iraq War in 1991, it was gradually questioned and often replaced by Sun Tzu. Two reasons played a role here. On the one hand, there were the new forms of non-state violence and, on the other, the new technological possibilities and the revolution in military affairs (RMA), which is far from being completed. That applies in particular to robotic and hybrid warfare, as well as the incorporation of artificial intelligence, that of space, and the development of quantum computers. The trigger for the change from Clausewitz to Sun Tzu was a seemingly new type of war, the so-called New Wars, which, strictly speaking, were not new at all, but were civil wars or those of non-state groups. In the view of the epoch-making theorists of the New Wars, such as Kaldor and, much more differentiated, Münkler, interstate wars were replaced by non-state wars, which were characterized by singular cruelty of the belligerents.¹⁰ These weapon bearers, seemingly a throwback to the past, appeared as child soldiers, warlords, drug barons, archaic fighters, terrorists, and common criminals styled as freedom fighters.¹¹

Since Sun Tzu lived in a time of perpetual civil wars in China, his ‘art of war’ seemed more applicable to intrastate war,¹² while Clausewitz’s conception was attributed to interstate war. In combating these new weapons carriers and the ‘markets of violence,’ civil war economies, or ‘spaces open to violence’ associated with them, Napoleon’s guiding principle was applied: ‘Only partisans help against partisans’.¹³ Accordingly, conceptions of warfare were developed by John Keegan and Martin van Creveld, for example, that amounted to an archaic warrior with state-of-the-art technologies.¹⁴ On the military level, the transformation of parts of the Western armed forces, including the Bundeswehr, from a defensive army to an intervention army took place. However, in contrast to the United States,

7 Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy. A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York, Novato, 1982).

8 Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz’s Puzzle*.

9 Idem.

10 Mary Kaldor, *Neue und alte Kriege*; Münkler, *Die neuen Kriege*.

11 Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Der Krieg. Geschichte und Gegenwart*. Second reworked and enlarged edition (Frankfurt, Campus, 2017).

12 Mark McNeilly, *Sun Tzu and the Art of Modern War* (Oxford: Oxford, University Press, 2001).

13 Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Der Krieg*.

14 John Keegan, *Die Kultur des Krieges* (Berlin, Rowohlt, 1995); van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*.

the Bundeswehr placed greater emphasis on pacifying civil society in these civil war economies, and ideally the soldier became a social worker in uniform.¹⁵

Consequently battles were fought by highly professional special forces in complex conflict areas. The initial success of the U.S. Army in Afghanistan can be attributed to the use of such special forces, which, as a result of modern communications capabilities, were able to engage superior U.S. airpower at any time. Because interstate warfare has returned to the forefront with the Ukraine war, Clausewitz may regain relevance in the coming years, unless the controversial concepts of hybrid warfare, John Boyd's OODA loop, or NATO's comprehensive approach gain further influence. With non-state warfare by states at their core, they thus enable a revival of Sun Tzu.

However, the paradigm shift from Clausewitz to Sun Tzu became even clearer in the second Iraq war in 2003. From the perspective of one commentator, this campaign was won in just a few weeks' time because the U.S. army was guided by Sun Tzu's principles, while Saddam Hussein's Russian advisors adhered to Clausewitz and Moscow's defence against Napoleon.¹⁶ Before the fall of Afghanistan, former U.S. Secretary of Defence James Mattis brought up the Clausewitz/Sun Tzu distinction anew. 'The Army was always big on Clausewitz, the Prussian; the Navy on Alfred Thayer Mahan, the American; and the Air Force on Giulio Douhet, the Italian. But the Marine Corps has always been more Eastern-oriented. I am much more comfortable with Sun-Tzu and his approach to warfare.'¹⁷

Without wholly following this distinction, it gives us hints that we cannot find absolutely valid approaches in Clausewitz's and Sun Tzu's conceptions, but differentiations in warfare. Simplifying the difference between the two we may observe that Clausewitz's approach is more comparable to wrestling,¹⁸ while Sun Tzu's is comparable to jiu-jitsu. The difference between the two becomes even clearer when comparing Clausewitz's conception to a boxing match. The

goal is to render the opponent incapable of fighting¹⁹ by striking his body, as Clausewitz himself points out, thereby forcing him to make peace. In contrast, Sun Tzu's goal is to unbalance his opponent so that even a light blow will force him to the ground because he will be brought down by his own efforts. Of course, these two aspects play a major role in both Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, but Clausewitz's strategy relates more to the body, the material means available to the war opponents, whereas Sun Tzu's strategy relates more to the mind, the will to fight. Both strategies have also often been conceptualized as the antithesis of direct and indirect strategy. In direct strategy, two more or less similar opponents fight on a delineated battlefield with roughly equal weapons and 'measure their strengths'; in indirect strategy, on the other hand, attempts are made, for example, to disrupt the enemy's supply of food and weapons or to break the will of the enemy population to continue supporting the war. The tank battles in World War II would be examples of symmetric warfare and the bombing of German cities and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki examples of asymmetric warfare. Non-state warfare is also asymmetrically structured in nearly all cases as it is primarily directed against the enemy civilian population.²⁰ Perhaps asymmetric warfare was most evident in the Yom Kippur War between the Israeli and the Egyptian armies. Egypt had indeed surprised Israel and managed to overrun Israeli positions along the Suez Canal. However, instead of giving the Egyptian army a tank battle in the Sinai, a relatively small group of tanks crossed the Suez Canal and attacked the rear of the Egyptian

- 15 Wilfried von Bredow, 'Kämpfer und Sozialarbeiter – Soldatische Selbstbilder im Spannungsfeld herkömmlicher und neuer Einsatzmissionen', in: S.B. Gareis and P. Klein, (eds.), *Handbuch Militär und Sozialwissenschaft* (Wiesbaden, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006).
- 16 Marwaan Macan-Marker, 'Sun Tzu: The Real Father of Shock and Awe,' *Asia Times*, 2, April 2003; Ralph Peters, 'A New Age of War,' *New York Post*, 10 April 2003.
- 17 Thomas E. Ricks, 'Quote of the day: Gen. Mattis' reading list, and why he looks more to the East,' *Foreign Policy*, 8 June 2015. See: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/08/quote-of-the-day-gen-mattis-reading-list-and-why-he-looks-more-to-the-east/>.
- 18 Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege* (Bonn, Dümmler, 1991) 191.
- 19 Ibidem.
- 20 Felix Wassermann, *Asymmetrische Kriege. Eine politiktheoretische Untersuchung zur Kriegführung im 21. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt, Campus, 2015).



James Mattis, second from the right as a Marine Corps General and very knowledgeable about military history, preferred Sun-Tzu's approach to warfare

army, cutting it off from its water supply and forcing it to surrender within a few days.²¹

This distinction between Clausewitz and Sun Tzu can be contradicted insofar as Clausewitz begins with a 'definition' of war in which the will of the attacker plays a major role and which states that war is an act of violence to force the opponent to comply with the former's will.²² But how is the opponent forced to do this in Clausewitz's conception? Clausewitz claims that that is done by destroying the opponent's forces. By this concept of annihilation, however, he does not understand a physical destruction in the narrowest sense, but to put the armed forces of the opponent in such a position that they can no longer continue the fight.²³

Sun Tzu

Sun Tzu's approach relates more directly to the enemy's thinking: 'The greatest achievement is to break the enemy's resistance without a fight.'²⁴ Or, accordingly, as Basil Liddell Hart later formulated it, 'Paralyzing the enemy's nervous system is a more economical form of operation than blows to the enemy's body.'²⁵ Sun Tzu's methodical thinking aims at a dispassionate assessment of the strategic situation and thus at achieving inner distance from events as a form of objectivity. This approach is rooted in Taoism, and in it the presentation of paradoxes is elevated to a method. Although *The Art of War* contains a number of seemingly unambiguous doctrines and rules of thumb, they cannot be combined into a consistent body of thought.

In this way, Sun Tzu confronts his readers (who are also his students) with thinking tasks that must be solved. Often these tasks take the form of the paradoxical. This becomes quite obvious in the following central paradox: 'To fight and

21 Herberg-Rothe, *Der Krieg*.

22 Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 191.

23 Idem, 215.

24 Sunzi, *Die Kunst des Krieges* (published with a foreword by James Clavell, München 1988) 35.

25 Basil Liddell Hart, *Strategie* (translated into German by Horst Jordan) (Wiesbaden, Rheinische Verlags-Anstalt, 1955) 281.

win all your battles is not the greatest achievement. The greatest achievement is to break the enemy's resistance without a fight.²⁶ In clear contradiction to the rest of the book, which deals with warfare, Sun Tzu here formulates the ideal of victory without a battle, and thus comes very close to the ideal of hybrid warfare, in which actual battle is only one of several options.

Obviously, he wants to urge his readers to carefully consider whether a war should be waged and, if so, under what conditions. It is consistent with this that Sun Tzu repeatedly reflects on the economy of war, on its economic and social costs, and at the same time refers to the less expensive means of warfare such as cunning, deception, forgery, and the use of spies. Victory without combat is thus the paradox with which Sun Tzu seeks to minimize the costs of an unavoidable conflict, to limit senseless violence and destruction, and to point to the unintended effects.

The form of the paradox is used several times in Sun Tzu's book, for example when he recommends to perform deceptive maneuvers whenever possible; this contradicts his statement that information about the opponent can be obtained accurately but is of limited use at least when the opponent is also skilled in deceptive maneuvers or is also able to see through the deceptions of his opponent. This contradiction stands out particularly glaringly when one considers that Sun Tzu repeatedly emphasizes the importance of knowledge, for example when he says, 'If you know the enemy and yourself, there is no doubt about your victory; if you know heaven and earth, then your victory will be complete.'²⁷ In a situation in which one must assume that the other person also strives to know as much as possible, this sentence can only be understood as a normative demand, as an ideal: knowledge becomes power when it represents a knowledge advantage, as Michel Foucault has emphasized in more recent times. To him knowledge is power. Cunning, deception and the flow of information, even when they are not absolutely necessary, are, however, in danger of becoming ends in themselves because they alone guarantee

an advantage in knowledge. Information, then, is the gold and oil of the 21st century.

The presentation of paradoxes is not an inadequacy for Sun Tzu but the procedure by which he instructs his readers/students. In contrast to the theoretical designs of many Western schools of thought, Sun Tzu relies here on non-directive learning: the paradox demands active participation from the reader, mirrors to him his structure of thinking and makes him question the suitability of his own point of view in thinking through the position of the opponent. Sun Tzu thereby forces his recipients to constantly examine the current situation and to frequently reflect. By repetitively thinking through paradoxical contradictions, the actor gains the inner distance and detachment from the conflict that are necessary for an impersonal, objectifying view of events. By being confronted with paradoxes, the reader learns to simultaneously adopt very different points of view, to play through the given variants, to form an understanding of the contradictions of real situations and, at the same time, make decisions as rationally as possible. In this way, the text encourages people not to rely on the doctrines it formulates as positive knowledge about conflict strategies but to practise repeated and ever new thinking through as a method. Sun Tzu's approach is thus characterized by highlighting paradoxes of warfare by designing strategies of action through reflection aimed at influencing the thinking of the opponent.

Elective affinities with Mao Zedong

The conception of the 'People's War' of the Chinese revolutionary Mao Zedong is a further development of that of Sun Tzu's and the dialectical thinking of Marx and Engels. At the same time, in these paradoxes he tries to provide an assessment and analysis of the situation that is as objective-scientific as possible, linking it to subjective experience: 'Therefore, the objects of

26 Sunzi, *Die Kunst des Kriegs*.

27 Idem, 211.



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Chinese revolutionary leader Mao Zedong repeatedly demonstrates thinking in interdependent opposites and is sometimes in complete agreement with Clausewitz

study and cognition include both the enemy's situation and our own situation, these two sides must be considered as objects of investigation, while only our brain (thought) is the investigating object.'²⁸

The comprehensive analyses that Mao prefaces each of his treatises with have two purposes: On the one hand, they serve as sober, objective investigations before and during the clashes,

which are intended to ensure rational predictions of what will happen and are based on reliable information and the most precise planning. On the other hand, Mao uses them to achieve the highest level of persuasion and to mobilize his followers through politicization. It is not for nothing that terms like 'explain,' 'persuade,' 'discuss,' and 'convince' are constantly repeated in his writings since the people's war he propagates requires unconditional loyalty and high morale.

Mao repeatedly demonstrates thinking in interdependent opposites, which can be understood as a military adaptation of the Chinese concept of Yin and Yang. His precise analyses demonstrate dialectical reversals; thus he can show that weakness is hidden in strength and strength in weakness. According to this mode of thinking, advantage can be found in every disadvantage, and in every disadvantage there is an advantage. An example of this is his explanation of the dispersion of forces: while conventional strategies proclaim the concentration of forces (as does Clausewitz),²⁹ Mao relies on dispersion. This approach confuses the one opponent and creates the illusion of the omnipresence of the other.

Mao understands confrontations as reciprocal interactions and, from this perspective, is able to weigh the relationship between concentration and dispersion differently: 'Performing a mock maneuver in the East, but undertaking the attack in the West'³⁰ means to bind the attention of the opponent but at the same time to become active where the opponent least expects it. Mao's method of dialectically seeking out weakness in strength and strength in weakness leads him to the flexibility that is indispensable for confronting a stronger opponent.

Finally, it is the ruthless analysis of one's own mistakes that brings Mao to his guiding principles. From a series of sensitive defeats, he concluded, 'The aim of war consists of nothing other than 'self-preservation and the destruction of the enemy' (to destroy the enemy means to disarm him or 'deprive him of his power of resistance,' but not to physically destroy him to

28 Mao Tse-tung, *Sechs Militärische Schriften* (Beijing, Verlag für fremdsprachige Literatur, 1970) 26.

29 Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 468.

30 Mao Tse-tung, *Sechs Militärische Schriften*, 372.

the last man).³¹ On this point, Mao Zedong is in complete agreement with Clausewitz. Mao also clarifies this core proposition by defining the concept of self-preservation dialectically, namely as an amalgamation of opposites: ‘Sacrifice and self-preservation are opposites that condition each other. For such sacrifices are not only necessary in order to preserve one’s own forces. A partial and temporary failure to preserve oneself (the sacrifice or payment of the price) is indispensable if the whole is to be preserved for the long run.’³²

Sun Tzu’s problems

Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* as well as the theorists of network centric warfare and 4th and 5th generation warfare focus on military success but miss the political dimension with regard to the post-war situation. They underestimate the process of transforming military success into real victory.³³ The three core elements of Sun Tzu’s strategy could not easily be applied in our time: Deceiving the opponent in general risks deceiving one’s own population as well, which would be problematic for any democracy. An indirect strategy in general would weaken deterrence against an adversary who can act quickly and decisively. Focusing on influencing the will and mind of the adversary may enable him to avoid a fight and merely resume it at a later time under more favourable conditions.

Sun Tzu is probably more likely to win battles and even whole campaigns than Clausewitz, but it is difficult to win a war by following the former’s principles. The reason is that Sun Tzu was never interested in shaping after-war political conditions because he lived in a time of seemingly never-ending civil wars. The only imperative for him was to survive while paying the lowest possible price and avoiding fighting because even a successful battle against one enemy could leave one weaker when the moment came to fight the next. As always in history, whenever people want to emphasize the differences between Sun Tzu and Clausewitz, the similarities between the two approaches are neglected. For example, the approach in Sun

In hybrid globalization, there is neither an either-or of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, nor a similarly simple as-well-as, but a productive tension between the two

Tzu’s chapter on ‘Swift Action to Overcome Resistance’ would be quite similar to the approach advocated by Clausewitz and practised by Napoleon. The main problem, however, is that Sun Tzu neglects the strategic perspective of shaping post-war political-social relations and their impact ‘by calculation’³⁴ on the conduct of the war. As mentioned earlier, this was not a serious issue for Sun Tzu and his contemporaries but it is one of the most important aspects of warfare in our time.³⁵

Finally, one must take into account that Sun Tzu’s strategy is likely to be successful against opponents that have a very weak order of forces or associated community, such as warlord systems and dictatorships, which were common opponents in his time. His book is full of cases where relatively simple actions against the order of the opposing army or its community lead to disorder on the part of the opponent until his armed forces are disbanded or lose their will to fight altogether. Such an approach can obviously be successful with opponents who have weak armed forces and an unstable social foundation

31 Idem, 349.

32 Idem, 175.

33 See: Macan-Marker, ‘Sun Tzu: The Real Father of Shock and Awe,’; Ralph Peters, ‘A New Age of War,’; Antulio Echevarria II, *Fourth-Generation Warfare and Other Myths* (Carlisle, Strategic Studies Institute, 2005).

34 Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 196.

35 Echevarria, *Fourth-Generation Warfare and Other Myths*; David Lonsdale, *The Nature of War in the Information Age* (London, Frank Cass, 2004).

but is likely to prove problematic with more entrenched opponents.

Here, the Ukraine war could be a cautionary example. Apparently, the Russian military leadership and the political circle around President Putin were convinced that this war, like the intervention in Crimea, would end quickly because neither the resistance of the Ukrainian population nor that of its army was expected, nor the will of the Western states to support Ukraine militarily. To put it pointedly, one could say that in the second Iraq war Sun Tzu triumphed over Clausewitz but in the Ukraine war Clausewitz triumphed over Sun Tzu. This also shows that while wars in the era of hybrid globalization³⁶ necessarily also take on

a hybrid character, it is much more difficult to successfully conduct hybrid warfare. Such a conflation of opposites is strategically at odds with those writings of Clausewitz's in which he generalizes the principles of Napoleonic warfare, though not with his determination of defence. The Ukraine war can even be seen as evidence of the greater strength of defence, as postulated by Clausewitz.³⁷

And Clausewitz?

At first glance Clausewitz's position is not compatible with that of Sun Tzu's. In his world-famous formula of the continuation of war by other means,³⁸ Clausewitz takes a hierarchical position with politics determining the superior end. Immediately before this formula, however, he writes that politics will pervade the entire warlike act but only insofar as the nature of the forces exploding within it permits.³⁹ With this statement he relativizes the heading of the 24th chapter, which contains the world-famous

36 Andreas Herberg-Rothe, 'The Dissolution of Identities in Liquid Globalization and the Emergence of Violent Uprisings', *African Journal of Terrorism and Insurgency Research*, Volume 1. No. 1 (April 2020) 11-32.

37 Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz's Puzzle*.

38 Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 210.

39 Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 210.



Training military personnel from Ukraine during Operation Interflex: one could say that in the Ukraine war Clausewitz triumphed over Sun Tzu

PHOTO FORSVARET, KAREN GJETRANG

formula. In addition, all headings of the first chapter, with the exception of the final conclusion of the first chapter containing the result of the theory, were in the handwriting of Marie von Clausewitz's, while only the actual text was written by Clausewitz (See Herberg-Rothe, on the discovery of the manuscript by Paul Donker).⁴⁰

The tension implicit in the formula becomes even clearer in the wondrous trinity: Clausewitz's 'result of the theory' of war. Here he writes that war is not only a true chameleon because it changes its nature somewhat in each concrete case, but a wondrous trinity. This is composed of the original violence of war, hatred and enmity, which can be seen as a blind natural instinct, the game of probabilities and chance, and war as an instrument of politics, whereby war falls prey to pure reason. Violence, hatred and enmity like blind natural instincts on the one side, and mere reason on the other; this is the decisive contrast in Clausewitz's wondrous trinity. For Clausewitz, all three tendencies of the wondrous trinity are inherent in every war; the difference in their composition is what makes wars different.⁴¹

While Clausewitz formulates a clear hierarchy between the end, aim and means of war in the initial definition and the world-famous formula, the wondrous trinity is characterized by a principled equivalence of the three tendencies of war's violence, the inherent struggle and its instrumentality. At its core, Clausewitz's wondrous trinity is a hybrid determination of war, which is why the term 'paradoxical trinity' is more often used in English versions. In his determination of the three interactions to the extreme, made at the beginning of the book, Clausewitz emphasizes the problematic nature of the escalation of violence in war due to its becoming independent because the use of force develops its own dynamics.⁴² The three interactions have often been misunderstood as mere guides to action but they are more likely to be considered as escalation dynamics in any war. This is particularly evident in escalation sovereignty in war when a side gains an advantage that can outbid the use of force. However, this outbidding of the adversary⁴³ brings with it the

problem of violence becoming an independent element. This creates a dilemma, which Clausewitz expresses in the wondrous trinity.

This dilemma between the danger of violence becoming independent and its rational application gives rise to the problem formulated at the outset, namely that there cannot be a single strategy applicable to all cases but that a balance of opposites is required.⁴⁴ In it, the primacy of politics is emphasized but at the same time this primacy is constructed as only one of three opposites of equal rank. Thus, Clausewitz's conception of the wondrous trinity is also to be understood as paradox, dilemma and hybrid.

As already observed in ethics, there are different ways to deal with such dilemmas.⁴⁵ One is to create a hierarchy between opposites. Here, particular mention should be made of the conception of trinitarian war, which was wrongly attributed to Clausewitz by Harry Summers and Martin van Creveld and was one of the causes of Clausewitz being considered obsolete by Mary Kaldor regarding the New Wars. For in the conception of trinitarian war the balance of three equal tendencies emphasized by Clausewitz is explicitly transformed into a hierarchy of government, army, and people/population. Even if it should be noted that this interpretation was favoured due to a faulty translation in which Clausewitz's notion of 'mere reason' was transformed into the phrase 'belongs to reason alone',⁴⁶ the problem is systematically conditioned. For one possible way of dealing with action dilemmas is such a hierarchization, or what Niklas Luhmann called 'functional differentiati-

40 Andreas Herberg-Rothe, discovery of Clausewitz's first three chapters in his handwriting before publishing. Forthcoming 2024.

41 Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 213; Andreas Herberg-Rothe, 'Clausewitz's "Wondrous Trinity" as a Coordinate System of War and Violent Conflict', in: *International Journal of Violence and Conflict* Vol. 3 (2) (2009) 62-77.

42 Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 192-193; Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz's Puzzle*; Herberg-Rothe, *Der Krieg*.

43 Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Das Rätsel Clausewitz* (München, Fink, 2001).

44 Herberg-Rothe, 'Clausewitz's Concept of Strategy'.

45 Andreas Herberg-Rothe, 'Ausnahmen bestätigen die Moral', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 16 June 2011.

46 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984).

on'.⁴⁷ We find a corresponding functional differentiation in all modern armies. Clausewitz himself had developed such a differentiation in his conception of the 'Small War', which was not understood as being the opposite of the 'Great War' but as its supporting element. In contrast, Clausewitz developed the contrast to the Great War between states in the 'People's War'.⁴⁸

A second way of dealing with dilemmas of action is to draw a line up to which one principle applies and above which others apply, as different principles would apply to war between states than to people's war, guerrilla warfare, war against terrorists, warlords, and wars of intervention in general. This was, for example, the proposal of Martin van Creveld and Robert Kaplan, who argued that in war against non-state groups the laws of the jungle must apply, not those of 'civilized' state war.⁴⁹ In contrast, there are also approaches that derive the uniformity of war from the ends, aims, means relation, arguing that every war, whether state war or people's war, has these three elements and that wars differ only in what ends are to be realized by which opponents with which means (I assume that this is the position of the Clausewitz-orthodoxy). It must be conceded that Clausewitz is probably inferior to Sun Tzu in practical terms with regard to the 'art of warfare' because in parts of his work he referred to a one-sided absolutization of Napoleon's warfare, while only in the book on defence did he develop a more differentiated strategy.⁵⁰ Perhaps one could say that Sun Tzu is more relevant to tactics whereas Clausewitz is to be preferred concerning strategy.

Summary

If we return to the beginning, Clausewitz is the (practical) philosopher of war,⁵¹ while Sun Tzu focuses on the 'art of warfare.' As is evident in the hybrid war of the present, due to technological developments and the process I have labelled hybrid globalization,⁵² any war can be characterized as hybrid. However, as is currently evident in the Ukraine war, the designation of a war as hybrid is different from successful hybrid warfare. This is because hybrid warfare necessarily combines irreconcilable opposites. This mediation of opposites⁵³ requires political prudence as well as skillful handling of *The Art of War*. The ideal-typical opposition of both is correct in itself, if we add the word 'more' to these opposites in each case, not the exclusive word 'or.'

Clausewitz's conception is 'more' related to politics, one's own material possibilities and those of the opponent, a direct strategy, and that of the late Clausewitz on a relative symmetry of the combatants and the determination of war as an instrument. This can be illustrated with a boxing match in which certain blows are allowed or forbidden (conventions of war), the battlefield and the time of fighting remain limited (declaration of war, conclusion of peace).

Sun Tzu's conception, on the other hand, refers more directly to the military opponent, his thinking and 'nervous system' (Liddell Hart), an indirect strategy (because a direct strategy in his time would have resulted in the weakening of one's own position even if successful), and a relative asymmetry of forms of combat.

Despite this ideal-typical construction, every war is characterized by a combination of these irreconcilable opposites. Consequently, the question is neither about an 'either-or' nor about a pure 'both-and,' but involves the question which strategy is the appropriate one in a concrete situation. To some extent, we must also distinguish in Clausewitz's conception of politics between a purely hierarchical understanding and an holistic construction. To put it simply, the former conception is addressed in

47 Niklas Luhmann and Sean Ward (2000). 'Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft', *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 73, No.2 (2000). Available at JSTOR Scholarly Journal Archive.

48 Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz's Puzzle*.

49 van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*; Kaplan, *Warrior Politics*.

50 Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz's Puzzle*; Herberg-Rothe, 'Clausewitz's Concept of Strategy'.

51 Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz as a Practical Philosopher*, Special issue of the Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence, guest editor Andreas Herberg-Rothe (Trivent, Budapest, 2022) See: <https://trivent-publishing.eu/home/140-philosophical-journal-of-conflict-and-violence-pjcv-clausewitz-as-a-practical-philosopher.html>.

52 Herberg-Rothe, 'The Dissolution of Identities in Liquid Globalization and the Emergence of Violent Uprisings'.

53 Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Lyotard und Hegel. Dialektik von Philosophie und Politik* (Wien, Passagen, 2005).



PHOTO U.S. NAVAL WAR COLLEGE, EZRA BOLENDER

Robert Kaplan is among scholars who argue that in war against non-state groups the laws of the jungle must apply, not those of 'civilized' state war

the relationship between political and military leadership; in the latter, any violent action by communities is per se a political one.⁵⁴ From a purely hierarchical perspective, it poses no problem to emphasize the primacy of politics in a de-bounded, globalized world with Clausewitz. If, on the other hand, from an holistic perspective all warlike actions are direct expressions of politics, the insoluble problem arises of how limited warfare could be possible in a de-bounded world.

This raises the question which of the two, Clausewitz or Sun Tzu, will be referred to more in the strategic debates of the future. In my view this depends on the role information technologies, quantum computers, artificial intelligence, drones, and the development of autonomous robotic systems will play in the future; in simple terms, the role that 'thought' and the 'soul' will play in comparison to material realities in a

globalized world. The Ukraine war arguably shows an overestimation of the influence of thought and soul (identity) on a community such as Ukraine's. With respect to autocratic states such as Russia and China, this is possibly an underestimation, at least temporarily, of the possibilities of manipulating the population through the new technologies. Regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine, the argument about Clausewitz and/or Sun Tzu will continue as an endless story, but this should not proceed as a mere repetition of dogmatic arguments but rather answer the question which is the better approach to take in whatever concrete situation.⁵⁵ ■

54 Echevarria, *Fourth-Generation Warfare and Other Myths*; Herberg-Rothe, 'Clausewitz's "Wondrous Trinity" as a Coordinate System of War and Violent Conflict.'

55 For hints and suggestions I thank Nihal Emeklier, Beatrice Heuser, Dan Moran, Jörg Lehmann, Johann Schmid and William Owen – all the more as we may not all hold the same position.