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Do Ideas Matter?: A Clausewitzian Case Study

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“Ideas matter,” the new Army Capstone Concept declares.¹ Ideas certainly do matter, and doctrine can be the key to victory or defeat. But it is immensely difficult to predict the form that ideas will eventually take. The reception and dilution of Clausewitzian theory in American military doctrine suggests that influence is contingent—and the end product of counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine’s continuing evolution in American strategy is unlikely to conform to the predictions of either COIN’s most fervent admirers or detractors.

Clausewitz Remixed

Carl von Clausewitz is almost universally regarded as history’s greatest strategic theorist. While figures such as Basil Liddell-Hart, Martin van Creveld, and John Keegan have criticized him harshly, these criticisms have not threatened his reputation among most strategic analysts.² Indeed, much of Colin S. Gray’s book *Modern Strategy* is devoted to explaining the enduring influence of Clausewitz’s strategic framework and why he has few (if any) significant competitors.³ One can say that he has practically created the basic framework of security studies.

Besides Clausewitz’s system of politics, his concept of the Center of Gravity (COG) is central to American strategic thought and is employed frequently in analysis. The Peter Paret translation of *On War* defines a COG as a place where “the mass is concentrated most densely. It presents the most effective target for a blow; furthermore, the heaviest blow is that struck by the center of gravity.” Clausewitz elaborates by noting “the same holds true in war. The fighting forces of each belligerent—whether a single state or an alliance of states—have a certain unity and therefore some cohesion.”⁴

¹ *The Army Capstone Concept: Operational Adaptability: Operating Under Conditions of Uncertainty and Complexity in an Era of Persistent Conflict 2016-2028*, Washington D.C.: Department of the Army, December 2009, p.

² See Christopher Bassford, “John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Trashing Clausewitz: A Polemic,” *War and History*, v.1, no.3 (November 1994), pp. 319-339. Accessed online at <http://www.clausewitz.com/readings/Bassford/Keegan/index.htm>

³ See Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, Michael Howard (trans), Peter Paret (trans), *On War*, Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 485.

The Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) scholar Antulio Echevarria II, however, disagrees with the Paret interpretation. The Army analyst argues that the Paret translation, while the best available, gives the false impression that COG is a source of strength. He then suggests that Clausewitz's own metaphor is drawn from classical physics' concept of "the point where the forces of gravity can be said to converge within an object, the spot at which the object's weight is balanced in all directions. Striking at or otherwise upsetting the center of gravity can cause the object to lose its balance, or equilibrium, and fall to the ground." In Echevarria's view, the center of gravity is neither a strength nor weakness. Echevarria explains that the COG is a point of connectivity—a state of unity or purpose from which the opponent comes together. As such, they can be directly attacked to upset the delicate balance.⁵ Echevarria argues that Clausewitz's concept is derived primarily from the mechanical sciences and reflects a holistic and systemic view of the opponent.

The Paret-Echevarria disagreement, however, is minor compared to the divergence between at least a loose interpretation of the original concept and how it is represented in doctrine. As Echevarria details, the concept has multiple interpretations—all of them somewhat far from the original intent. Interpretations of the COG range from set of multiple critical points that can be attacked with a targeting approach to a somewhat capabilities-based conception of a source of strength at both the strategic and operational levels. The latter interpretation has been fleshed out with a complicated set of relationships known as the critical weaknesses, requirements, and vulnerabilities.⁶ A sample definition can be found in current joint doctrine as the "source of moral or physical strength, power, and resistance...[comprising] the source of power that provides freedom of action, physical strength, and will to fight."⁷ Thus, as Echevarria notes, the doctrinal definition of the COG is focused on opposing force capabilities rather than the connections between them.

This might strike some readers as a minor disagreement, but it does have policy implications. "The concept does not apply if enemy elements are not connected sufficiently," Echevarria points out. "In other words, successful antiterrorist operations in Afghanistan may not cause al-Qa'ida cells in Europe or Singapore to collapse."⁸ This point is especially relevant in a time when the main strategic justification for continued operations in Afghanistan is the struggle against international terrorism. The concept of a COG cannot be employed in all situations, though it is tempting at times to do so. Echevarria also suggests that "[t]he U.S. military's various definitions lack entirely Clausewitz's sense of 'unity' or 'connectivity.' By overlooking this essential prerequisite, the U.S. military assumes centers of gravity exist where none might—the enemy may not have sufficient connectivity between its parts to have a CoG. In that case the analysis does little more than focus on the most critical of the enemy's capabilities."⁹

Clausewitz's "remarkable trinity" is often similarly misinterpreted. Both proponents and detractors of Clausewitzian theory have taken the idea of the trinity to literally mean the relationship between the people, the state, and the armed forces. This is not entirely wrong, but

⁵ Antulio Echevarria II, "Clausewitz's Center of Gravity: It's Not What We Thought," *Naval War College Review*, Winter 2003, Vol. LVI, No. 1, accessed at <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/navy/art4-w03.htm>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Joint Publication 3-0 Joint Operations*, Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2006, p. IV-10.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

as Christopher Bassford notes, it is hardly the full meaning of Clausewitz's concept. "Clausewitz's trinity is really made up of three categories of forces: irrational forces (violent emotion, i.e., 'primordial violence, hatred, and enmity'); non-rational forces (i.e., forces not the product of human thought or intent, such as 'friction' and 'the play of chance and probability'); and rationality (war's subordination to reason, 'as an instrument of policy'). Clausewitz then *connects* each of those forces 'mainly' to one of three sets of human actors: the people, the army, and the government."¹⁰ A full rendering of Clausewitz's trinity makes it applicable across the spectrum of conflict, unlike the more limited approach prescribed by a partial reading.

The point of this essay is *not* to argue that modern American doctrine should reflect Clausewitz's theories purely. Knowledge of Clausewitz is not a prerequisite for victory—Alexander the Great, Napoleon I, and the Mongols all did without it. Additionally, the difficult and unfinished form of the work as well as the problems of translation make misunderstanding easy. Clausewitz scholars such as Raymond Aron, Christopher Bassford, Antulio Echevarria, Jon Sumida, and Azar Gat also disagree on interpretations of his work—and the scholars named are just a small sampling of the many writers who have dissected Clausewitz's work since it was first published. Most importantly, American strategic concepts should reflect American strategic culture and sensibilities. For better or worse, American strategic culture embraces an engineering mindset, and the joint doctrine conceptualization of COG may or may not be the best tool for American strategy.

However, the diffusion and Americanization of Clausewitz strongly suggests that the nature of influence is contingent. Ideas are not injected into organizations like the mind-control serums seen in Saturday morning cartoon shows. Communications scholars rebutting spurious claims that violent video games cause social deviance derisively refer to this fallacious model of influence as the "injection model." Instead, ideas are often transformed and remixed by those who receive them according to a range of competing influences. Doctrine is no exception. Theorists should be careful about making judgments on the influence of certain ideas and the respective purity of their realization in defense affairs.

Conclusion

It is natural that a 200-year old theorist's ideas would be interpreted differently by many people over wildly divergent periods of time--especially a theorist who did not intend his ideas to be interpreted in a formulaic fashion. Ironically, most criticisms of Clausewitz's ideas are actually attacks on inaccurate or rigid renderings that the dead Prussian would most likely have found baffling.

Ideas can also drastically change over time. Soviet military expert David Glantz's books *Soviet Military Operational Art: In Pursuit of Deep Battle* and *The Military Strategy of the Soviet Union: A History* showed how even the doctrine of history's greatest totalitarian power remained far from static.¹¹ Talking about a singular Soviet military operational concept is thus extremely

¹⁰ Christopher Bassford and Edward J. Villacres, "Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity," *Parameters*, Summer 1995. Available online at <http://www.clausewitz.com/readings/Bassford/Trinity/TRININTR.htm>

¹¹ See David Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art: In Pursuit of Deep Battle*, London: Cass, 1991 and *The Military Strategy of the Soviet Union: A History*, London: Cass, 1992.

difficult, although common themes can be traced over the history of Soviet military thought. Even so, Bruce Menning argues, many Soviet military ideas are merely restatements of concepts from the 19th century Czarist military.¹²

The changing nature of intellectual transmission will make tracing influence more difficult. Lawrence Lessig argues in his book *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* that a changing economy will make “read/write culture”—the extensive alteration of products by those who consume them—more common. Lessig notes that the present generation has largely grown up with “remix culture” and will be loath to relinquish it.¹³ Of course, the Lessig concept has limits—a centralized organization like the Department of Defense (DOD) is not the same thing as DJs cutting up and remixing a popular song. But the term has some relevance to security thought. *Small Wars Journal* itself is an example of this, as the Army Capstone Concept was first given to the forum in draft form for comment.

COIN is alternatively described as a contributing factor to adaptive victory in Iraq or the cause of future defeats.¹⁴ But debate often assumes that the doctrine, for better or worse, will continue in the more or less pure state represented in *FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency*—itself a “remix” of David Galula’s synthesis of French colonial warfare best practices. COIN will continue to evolve based on a host of factors as it is pragmatically assembled and re-assembled by practitioners seeking to adapt theory to ground-level realities. Mark Safranski also astutely points out that geopolitical forces will likely also force a scaling-down of what we understand as COIN doctrine.¹⁵

American doctrine and security thought is often correctly described as rigid. But the transfusion of Clausewitz in American thought shows that Americans are comfortable with the remixing of different bits and pieces of “pure” theories to fit American strategic sensibilities. Whether or not the results of this innovation are worthwhile is open to question. But it is likely that COIN’s end path will surprise both admirers and detractors.

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¹² See Bruce W. Menning, “The Imperial Russian Legacy of Operational Art, 1878-1914,” in Krause and Phillips, pp. 189-213.

¹³ See Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*, New York: Penguin Press, 2008.

¹⁴ For an encapsulation of the debate see Gian P. Gentile, “A (Slightly) Better War: A Narrative and its Defects,” *World Affairs Journal*, Summer 2008. <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/2008%20-%20Summer/full-Gentile.html>

¹⁵ Mark Safranski, “The Post-COIN Era is Here,” *Zenpundit*, January 25, 2010. <http://zenpundit.com/?p=3315>

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