



SMALL WARS

JOURNAL

What is War? A New Point of View

By *Jill Long*

Journal Article | Dec 5 2012 - 4:30am

Abstract

The historical context of the term war has left an indelible imprint on the minds of strategic leaders and the general public. This imprint limits one's ability to view warfare as anything other than armed conflict between nations. This paper attempts to open the aperture through which strategic leaders view the concept of war by reviewing the traditional definitions of war, analyzing the environment in which wars are fought today, and then offering a new, more expansive, definition of the term. This new definition encompasses the complex characteristics and nuances of war fought in a global society, a broader interpretation of who engages in war, and how wars may be fought and won in the future.

Defining War

Merriam-Webster Dictionary describes war as “a state of usually open and declared armed hostile conflict between states or nations.”^[1] Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states, “war should be understood as an *actual, intentional* and *widespread* armed conflict between political communities.”^[2] On the first page of *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz defines war as “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.”^[3] Most would agree that these are understandable and accurate definitions in the general context of what the average person thinks when they hear the word war. However, from the strategic perspective, these definitions are arguably too simplistic to convey the complexity of war and the many facets which contribute to national success in the international arena. Today's strategic leaders need to conceptualize and define war in a broader perspective, and the following analysis will attempt to do so by offering an expansive definition for the term *war*. This new definition encompasses three attributes: the complex characteristics and nuances of war fought in a global society, a broader interpretation of who engages (or should be engaged) in war, as well as how wars may be fought and won in the future. But first it is necessary to examine why a new definition for war is applicable for today's strategic leaders.

What Changed?

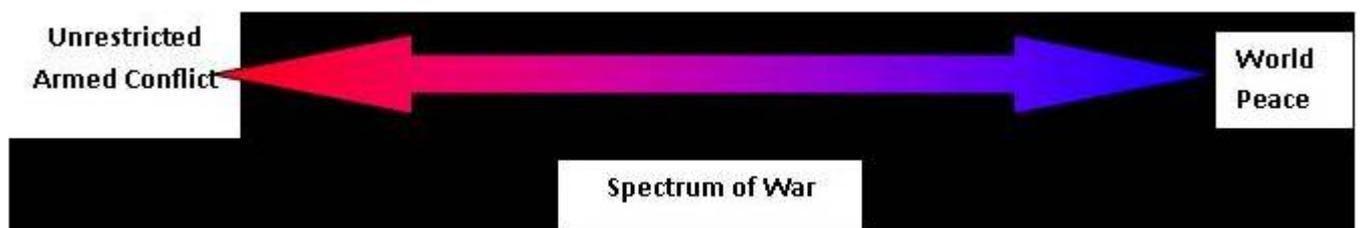
Many might say that the world changed with the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States; this was certainly the case for the majority of the American public. Terrorism was no longer something that occurred at bus stops in Israel or in discos in Berlin. The world of terrorism became something tangible to America. It solidified in Americans' minds that war can and will be conducted between state and non-state actors. This distinction is significant in the context of the traditional perception that war was fought between nation-states (or city-states as early as the Peloponnesian War). It also challenges the belief that war is governed by some form of decorum or rule of law, in which the belligerents agree to engage utilizing specific limitations and exclusions; whether the combatants have honored that agreement, is another discussion. From the battlefield engagements of the Clausewitzian era, to the formal rule of law and Geneva Conventions that nation-states operate under today, there existed a certain level of restraint. Terrorism and violent aggression conducted by non-state actors requires strategic leaders to rethink these

traditional characteristics of warfare and the definition of war itself. War is no longer limited to “conflict between states or nations,” nor is it fought solely between political communities as the Global War on Terrorism has proven.[4] As Joseph Nye illustrated, “in today’s global information age...more things are happening outside the control of even the most powerful states.”[5] In 2006, “161 billion gigabytes of digital information were created and captured;” about “3 million times the information in all the books ever written.”[6] This connectivity has driven globalization down to the individual and small group level; enabling non-state actors to think, act, and locate themselves globally; in some cases without ever leaving their home because of technology.[7] Therefore, how we engage in this contest of wills must expand given this dramatic increase in globalization of the past two decades.

The Spectrum of War in the Global Era

Michael Howard summarizes the changing environment as shifting from one centered on the control of territory, to one focused not only on territorial control but the effective exploitation of the resources of that territory.[8] This concept leads to a new approach to view and define war...within the context of globalization. As the global finance crisis illuminated, economies can no longer be managed/controlled internally but in fact are impacted by events and decisions made across the world.[9] One only needs to reference the so called “CNN effect,” the Arab Spring or current anti-American protests to understand the impact digital communications and the 24-hour news cycle have had on regional and world affairs.[10] The bottom line: “interconnected systems of trade, finance, information, and security” demand a larger perspective when considering the engagement of imposing national will on others.[11]

One method to approach this broader perspective is to view war as a spectrum of discord, a continuum where unrestrained armed conflict and world peace are at opposing ends. By establishing this graphic scale, it is relatively easy to conceptualize that as a nation approaches peace (or harmony) with other entities’ values, objectives, and ideals, there is an abeyance of hostilities. War is not over, a nation’s desire to impose its will remains; it simply does not require the use of armed conflict to achieve its goals. What might appear on the surface to be the age old argument between Thomas Hobbes’ theory of man’s natural state as one of war and John Locke’s more peaceful perspective, is actually providing the answer to that debate...both may be right. If a nation’s will is in harmony with other entities’ then the natural tendency will lean towards world peace. As discord develops between a nation’s will and other nation-states or non-state actors the natural tendency will increasingly lean towards more aggressive national engagement and armed conflict. This theory purposefully focuses on nation-states and/or non-state actors versus the individual. While one may argue it can be applied to individual interaction, this is not the author’s intent.



This spectrum facilitates understanding that the art of war encompasses much more than the concept of armed conflict and acknowledges a nation’s capability to change their “natural state” based on the will of the people, political landscape, as well as a nation’s strength, ability, and desire to project power.

War Redefined

A strategic leader’s concept of war must necessarily be more encompassing, and also more complex:

War is the coherent execution of all means to bring about sufficient adherence to a nation's will in the international (global) arena; resulting in armed conflict only when all other means fail.

As one observes from this new definition, the constant is Clausewitz's theory of a nation's primary desire in conflict "to compel our enemy to do our will."^[12] What has changed is both the focus and breadth of those means within the nation which can be used to accomplish this action. While Clausewitz advocated in a limited manner (and Kautilya more energetically) the use of diplomacy in war, this concept takes a more dramatic approach by including all means available to a nation-state or non-state actor. It also diverges from the traditional definition of war as "armed conflict" by suggesting war is not an act of armed aggression but instead the constant desire and actions of nation-states and non-state actors to impose their will. The rationale behind this approach is explained by examining each of the key components of the definition separately.

War is: Like Clausewitz, the author views war as an extension of national policy; however, not as a specifically separate activity as defined by armed conflict. The activity of war is ongoing and the participants in imposing a nation's will are many, as will be examined in the next component.

the coherent execution of all means: This expansionary phrase is derived from the author's belief that armed conflict is one end of the spectrum of war, and as such should not (and arguably cannot) be delineated from all other means in a global era. It also conveys advocacy for coordination between these entities in order to develop a cohesive approach to international relations and engagement, particularly in the area of conflict resolution. Traditional definitions of war centered on a nation's "war effort" are usually directed via the application of the armed forces and in limited cases via diplomacy (Kautilya/Clausewitz). The proffered concept opens the aperture of conflict resolution and directs a more holistic approach to achieving national strategy and/or achieving adherence to national will. This is not to imply the Kautilyan or Machiavellian logic of all ways to victory are acceptable.^[13] Instead, it exhorts the use of all means within a nation's capacity to gain adherence to its national will without resorting to armed conflict. It is inclusive of Gene Sharp's concept of nonviolent conflict resolution in that "nonviolent action is a means of combat, as is war."^[14] However, this specific definition differs from Sharp's by taking a more pragmatic approach and a national perspective. As such, the means advocated for nonviolent action are not the individual-centric capabilities Sharp espouses: nonviolent protest, persuasion, noncooperation, and intervention. Rather, it takes a nation-centric approach to power projection and advocates use of diplomacy, economic influence (to include leverage via multi-national corporations and non-governmental organizations), information operations, social influence, and educational influence.^[15] While each of these means should be coordinated and leveraged in a coherent approach, the concept does not advocate a blurring of the traditional separations of national power from the U.S. perspective. Instead, it suggests a "one voice approach" in the international arena where each institution self-identifies those capabilities which could be applied in a synergistic manner towards achieving national objectives.

The acknowledged challenge to democracies is how to create a structure through which to coordinate such activity without infringing upon the freedoms on which democracy is based. This theory will surely stimulate argument as to whether it is possible to limit a democratic nation's actions in demanding capabilities from each of these institutions and the course of due process. The concept of free-market enterprises and unfair market advantage will be a particularly significant challenge to incorporate in this holistic approach to warfare. It could be suggested that nations already leverage economic pressure via the vehicle of diplomacy through trade agreements, restrictions, and embargos. With a proper framework for implementation, the same types of pressure could be applied through a coordinated approach for all institutions while preserving democratic principles.

to bring about sufficient adherence to a nation's will: in this definition war remains as Clausewitz described, “an act of policy” and the ultimate goal of war remains to impose a nation's will on its enemies. [16] The term “sufficient” is intentionally ambiguous, which accommodates the changing nature of national will as well as the variables in any international relations scenario. Determining sufficiency demands a political calculation or cost-benefit analysis; for every change in the level of effort/cost of engagement what is the expected outcomes, and are those outcomes worthy of the effort. The calculus will vary as the means available change and with the changing of a nation's strategic vision. A corollary to this thought is the question, at what point will a nation apply the most dire means available, military force, to achieve its national will? Once again the answer depends on the domestic and international environment (tensions, alliances, aggression, economy, etc), the political tendencies of the government, the mood and the will of the people, as well as the capabilities and readiness of the armed forces. This broad spectrum approach allows for the definition to be applied regardless of a nation's ideological tendencies. Whether one follows the thoughts of Karl Marx (war is the politics of economics), Thucydides (fear, interest and honor), Hobbes (competition, diffidence, and glory), or Locke (freedom), the calculus remains...it is up to the nation to decide the point at which it is beneficial to engage in warfare to secure its national objectives.

in the international (global) arena: The terms international and global capture the fact that wars are fought between both state actors (international) and non-state actors (such as terrorist groups and transnational criminal networks) on the global stage. This statement specifically limits engagement in war to the international (global) stage and intentionally excludes the concept of “civil war”. This exclusion is not meant to discredit the impact these conflicts can have on the global stage. The reason for the exclusion is based on national will. During armed or unarmed conflict within a nation's boundaries conducted by its citizens, it can be argued that a nation's will is in flux or at least weakened to the point that the full measure of means cannot, and should not, be applied. In such cases, a more accurate term for these events would be (armed or unarmed) civil conflict.

resulting in armed conflict when all other means fail: This phrase acknowledges the sage advice of Sun Tzu's teachings, “To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”[17] This is not to imply that the primary policy should be one of avoiding armed conflict at all costs, but instead to leverage all other capabilities to achieve national will (or national/strategic objectives) before resorting to the costly venture of applying military force when reasonable. It is this author's belief that wars of the future will be fought through the exploitation of non-traditional power projection methods such as economic influence, educational influence, and information control/influence (cyberspace). Future wars resulting in armed conflict between state and non-state actors may take place for three reasons: attempting to leverage diametrically-opposed wills on one another or one another's allies, asymmetric power capabilities demanding the weaker actor use armed force in an attempt to impose its will on a greater power, or actions taken by irrational actors.

How Wars End

As the proffered definition implies, there is no “end” to the spectrum of war. Therefore, the answer to the question of “how does war end?” would be...they do not; this answer however, would be unsatisfying at best. A more succinct question would be, “how does armed conflict end?” In this case, the resultant response is when sufficient adherence to national will has been achieved. The concept encourages nation-states and non-state actors to clearly define objectives for armed conflict and those actions/events that must occur in order to bring about an end to armed hostility. This is arguably somewhat naïve, but there is potential for tangible benefits by embracing this approach. Internally, this furthers the theory of “one voice” by clarifying the objectives to all entities. Externally, it provides the opposition with a clear path

towards peace, while allowing for modifications via negotiations, course of battle, escalation and de-escalation of hostilities.

Summary

War is no longer a discrete action of armed conflict but a continuum of engagement in order to limit the dissonance between a nation's will and that of other state and non-state actors. In war, nation-states and non-state actors utilize all means available; diplomacy, economic influence (including multi-national corporations and non-governmental organizations), information operations, social influence, and educational influence as well as military force in order to encourage adherence to their will. As such wars do not end; rather imposing one's will and maintaining harmony between national objectives and those of the international community to the level of acceptable adherence precludes the use of armed conflict.

War is the coherent execution of all means to bring about sufficient adherence to a nation's will in the international (global) arena; resulting in armed conflict only when all other means fail.

The author recognizes that the historical context of the term war has left an indelible imprint on the minds of strategic leaders and the general public. This imprint limits the ability of the offered definition to achieve widespread understanding and use by U.S. or international leadership and most assuredly the general public. However, the goal of this essay was to open the aperture through which strategic leaders view the concept of war and stimulate discussion in the hopes of achieving the "acme of skill" as a war fighter of subduing our enemy and imposing our will without resorting to armed conflict.^[18]

Notes

[1] "Merriam-Webster Dictionary", definition of war, accessed September 17, 2012, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/war?show=0&t=1347910895>.

[2] Brian Orend, "War", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed September 18, 2012, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/war/>.

[3] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 75

[4] Merriam-Webster, *War*, 2012.

[5] Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power*, (New York, NY: Public Affairs), 113.

[6] *Ibid*, 115.

[7] Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the 21st Century*, 2005 (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux).

[8] Michael Howard, *The Causes of War from the Causes of War and Other Essays*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 16.

[9] United States Government, *The Financial Crisis Inquiry Report*, January 2011, (Washington, DC: U.S.

Government Printing Office), 417-420.

[10] Jack Sine, Defining the 'Precision weapon' in effects-based terms, *Air & Space Power Journal*, Spring 2006, accessed March 3, 2011, <http://www.freepatentsonline.com/article/Air-Space-Power-Journal/154817984.html>.

[11] General Norton A. Schwartz and Admiral Jonathan W. Greenert, "Air-Sea Battle: Promoting Stability in an Era of Uncertainty", *The American Interest*, February 12, 2012, accessed September 12, 2012, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=1212>.

[12] Clausewitz, *On War*, 75.

[13] Dr. Robert C. Nation, U.S. Army War College Seminar Lecture, September 6, 2012.

[14] Gene Sharp, *The Role of Power in Nonviolent Struggle*, (Boston, MA: The Albert Einstein Institution, 1990), 9.

[15] *Ibid*, 9.

[16] Clausewitz, *On War*, 87.

[17] Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 77.

[18] *Ibid*.

About the Author



Jill Long

Lt Col Jill Long is currently a student at the Army War College. Previous assignments include squadron command, air liaison officer (ALO), Chief of AFCENT's Commander's Action Group, A-10 pilot and KC-135 pilot.

Available online at : <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/what-is-war-a-new-point-of-view>

Links:

- { 1 } <http://smallwarsjournal.com/author/jill-long>
- { 2 } http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftn1
- { 3 } http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftn2
- { 4 } http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftn3
- { 5 } http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftn4
- { 6 } http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftn5
- { 7 } http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftn6
- { 8 } http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftn7

- {9} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftn8
- {10} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftn9
- {11} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftn10
- {12} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftn11
- {13} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftn12
- {14} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftn13
- {15} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftn14
- {16} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftn15
- {17} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftn16
- {18} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftn17
- {19} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftn18
- {20} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftnref1
- {21} <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/war?show=0&t=1347910895>
- {22} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftnref2
- {23} <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/war/>
- {24} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftnref3
- {25} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftnref4
- {26} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftnref5
- {27} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftnref6
- {28} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftnref7
- {29} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftnref8
- {30} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftnref9
- {31} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftnref10
- {32} <http://www.freepatentsonline.com/article/Air-Space-Power-Journal/154817984.html>
- {33} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftnref11
- {34} <http://www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=1212>
- {35} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftnref12
- {36} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftnref13
- {37} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftnref14
- {38} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftnref15
- {39} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftnref16
- {40} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftnref17
- {41} http://smallwarsjournal.com/node/add/article#_ftnref18
- {42} <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/clausewitz-and-the-non-state-actor-a-contemporary-application-of-the-paradoxical-trinity-to>
- {43} <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/counterinsurgency-domestic-politics-by-other-means>

Copyright © 2018, Small Wars Foundation.



Select uses allowed by Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license per our [Terms of Use](#).
Please help us support the [Small Wars Community](#).