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Clausewitz's Theory of War and Victory in Contemporary Conflict

Emile Simpson

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ABSTRACT: This article considers whether Clausewitz's account of the nature of war is universal to all wars, in order then to assess how far his concept of victory is universal. While aspects of Clausewitz's concept of war are still universal, others are not. Accordingly, his theory of victory is not universal to all wars, and especially not to wars fought against transnational terrorist networks.

Western strategic thought is still heavily conditioned by the work of the Prussian soldier-scholar Carl von Clausewitz. In his main work, *On War*, he sets out a theory of war and a theory of warfare. The two are intrinsically related; his theory of warfare is designed to work within his theory of war. This article considers first how far Clausewitz's theory of war applies today, and then, considers the applicability of the idea of victory within his theory of warfare.

Clausewitz's Theory of the Nature of War

To assess both continuity and change in war, a standard distinction in contemporary debate is drawn between the nature (permanent features) and character (context dependent features) of war. Although this distinction is commonly misattributed to Clausewitz, he did not use the term "nature" in quite this way. Hence at the end of book 1, chapter 1, he writes: "War is thus more than a mere chameleon, because it changes its nature (*seine natur*) to some extent in each concrete case."¹ If nature is supposed to be unchanging, how can we make sense of this passage?

As Antulio J. Echevarria II sets out, Clausewitz followed a dialectical analytical framework in which the world could be seen either in the abstract, through the lens of reasoning based on pure logic, or in reality, through the lens of reasoning based on practical experience.² To understand the nature of a given phenomenon through this dialectical analysis, the abstract perspective is tested against practical reality.

In *On War*, this dialectical analysis produces a narrow and a broad account of what war *is*. Both are set out in book 1, chapter 1, which opens with this definition of war as an abstract phenomenon:

1 For this translation as well as the original German, "Der Krieg ist also nicht nur ein wahres Chamäleon, weil er in jedem konkreten Falle seine Natur etwas ändert," see Christopher Bassford, "Teaching the Clausewitzian Trinity: A Teaching Note," Clausewitz.com, 2007, <https://www.clausewitz.com/readings/Bassford/Trinity/TrinityTeachingNote.htm>. Note that Michael Howard and Peter Paret's translation translates *natur* here as "characteristics." Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Howard and Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 89.

2 One can identify this approach as Kantian or Hegelian. See Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

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War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will. . . . To secure that object we must render the enemy powerless; and that, in theory, is the true aim of warfare. That aim takes the place of the object, discarding it as something not actually part of war itself.³

What Clausewitz does here is to delimit a narrow account of war as a purely military act in which the military objective takes the place of the political aim, which is then classified as being outside war itself. This idealized, abstract view of war is sequential: the focus during war—the true aim of warfare—is on the military objective; only when the military objective is satisfied does the political objective once again come to the fore. In other words, there is a clear line between military action in war and political action in peace.

Clausewitz posits how in the abstract: “If you want to overcome your enemy you must match your effort against his power of resistance. . . . But the enemy will do the same; competition will again result and, in pure theory, it must again force you both to extremes.”⁴ Crucially, however, Clausewitz notes that a war would only conform to the ideal if it was a single decisive act isolated from its political context, which for that reason, means that no war in reality has ever met this ideal.⁵ That said, in the next chapter he notes “many wars have come very close” to the abstract form.⁶

Clausewitz goes on to list several reasons why the nature of war in the abstract is moderated by a variety of factors that affect war in reality, namely: (a) Making the maximum effort to achieve the military objective will often be disproportionate to the political aim; (b) Belligerents will typically not be able to, or want to, mobilize all their forces for one decisive act; (c) The result in war is never final, which frustrates the idea of a neat line between war and peace; (d) Strategic thought is much more a subjective question of weighting probabilities based on one’s knowledge of the enemy than an exercise in abstract logic; (e) The political object during the war may or may not motivate the people to support the war; (f) One side may refuse battle or suspend hostilities to wait for a better moment to act; (g) There will often not be “polarity,” by which he means symmetry of objective, and when a war is not fought over the same thing, the incentives on either side are clearly different (Clausewitz seems to mean both military and political objectives, but he is not clear on the point.); (h) Defense is the stronger form of war, so the side on the defensive need not make as much effort at the attacking side; (i) Commanders on each side typically have imperfect knowledge of the situation; (j) “No other human activity is so . . . bound up with chance”; And finally, (k) that the means by which war is actually fought involves analysis of moral qualities, above all courage, that are not susceptible to logical analysis, but are far more a question of weighting probabilities, and this aspect makes war “like a game of cards,” gambling on probabilistic assumptions, not logic.⁷

3 Clausewitz, *On War*, 75.

4 Clausewitz, *On War*, 77.

5 Clausewitz, *On War*, 78.

6 Clausewitz, *On War*, 90.

7 Clausewitz, *On War*, 77–86.

Having gone through all these reasons, Clausewitz summarizes:

War, therefore, is an act of policy. Were it a complete, untrammled, absolute manifestation of violence (as the pure concept would require), war would of its own independent will usurp the place of policy the moment policy had brought it into being; it would then drive policy out of office and rule by the laws of its own nature, very much like a mine that can explode only in the manner or direction predetermined by the setting.⁸

On this basis, Clausewitz sets up a distinction between absolute and more limited forms of war, which he develops mainly in book 8. Absolute war is only found in the abstract, but provides a pole the further from which one moves, the more limited the war in reality. This polarity sets up a spectrum in which at one end, as noted above, one finds wars that get very close to being absolute, while at the other end, one gets to a vanishing point where war becomes merely “a matter of mutual observation.”⁹ The more absolute the war—that is, the more war conforms to its “natural tendency,” the less there is a distinction between the military and political objective, and so the more the destruction of the enemy comes to the forefront of warfare. Conversely, the more limited the war, the more political considerations will displace purely military considerations in the practice of warfare.¹⁰

In summary, to understand what Clausewitz means by the nature of war, it is necessary to recognize that there are two ideas of war at play in *On War*. One is the abstract version found in the realm of logic, which Clausewitz identifies as the nature of war. As Clausewitz stresses, “it must be observed that the phrase the *natural tendency* of war, is used in its philosophical, strictly *logical* sense alone and does not refer to the tendencies of the forces that are actually engaged in fighting—including—for instance, the morale and emotions of the combatants.”¹¹

The other idea of war is the phenomenon produced when the abstract concept of war is modified by reality, to give us real war. This is the idea of war that we reach at the end of book 1, chapter 1, in which Clausewitz presents his well-known image of the “total phenomenon” of war as it appears in reality as a “trinity” comprised of three “dominant tendencies.”¹² These three tendencies effectively provide categorical buckets within which to place the various reasons listed above for why war in reality moderates the abstract concept.

These dominant tendencies were: “primordial violence, hatred and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force”; “the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam”; and “its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.” He continues, “the first of these three aspects mainly concerns the people; the second the commander and his army; the third the government.” He summarizes, “these three tendencies are like three different codes of law, deep-rooted in their subject and yet variable in their relationship to one another. . . . Our task,

8 Clausewitz, *On War*, 87.

9 Clausewitz, *On War*, 488.

10 Clausewitz, *On War*, 88.

11 Clausewitz, *On War*, 88.

12 Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.

therefore, is to develop a theory that maintains a balance between these three tendencies, like an object suspended between three magnets.”¹³

We can now answer the problem stated above: that if nature is supposed to be unchanging, how can we make sense of Clausewitz’s assertion that “war,” as Bassford translates, “changes its nature (*seine natur*) to some extent in each concrete case?” Read in the context of the whole of the chapter, we can clearly see Clausewitz is referring to the modification of the abstract, logical idea of war in practice. Hence this passage is immediately followed by the presentation of the trinity, which identifies categories of reasons why war in its pure form tends to be modified in practice.

Is Clausewitz’s Theory of War Universal?

We just saw how the nature of war was, for Clausewitz, war in its abstract form, as distinct from the concept as it appeared in reality. However, in contemporary debate, the “nature” of war in Clausewitz’s theory is generally identified with the trinity, rather than the abstract concept. This association is confusing, because Clausewitz himself never identifies the trinity with the nature of war. Rather, he explains the trinity is comprised of the three dominant tendencies representing the various factors that in reality moderate war’s abstract nature. Hence, as noted above, he sees the trinity as part of war understood as a total phenomenon, that is, its abstract nature modified in reality by the three dominant tendencies of the trinity.

In my view, it follows from Clausewitz’s abstract account of the nature of war that his account of war in *On War* is not universal. Consider again, in more detail, the passage at the start of book 1, chapter 1, in which he identifies war’s abstract nature:

I shall . . . go straight to the heart of the matter, to the duel. War is nothing but a duel on a larger scale. Countless duels go to make up war, but a picture of it as a whole can be formed by imagining a pair of wrestlers. Each tries through physical force to compel the other to do his will; his *immediate* aim is to *throw* his opponent in order to make him incapable of further resistance. War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will. . . . Force . . . physical force . . . is thus the means of war; to impose our will on the enemy is its object. To secure that object we must render the enemy powerless; and that, in theory, is the true aim of warfare. That aim takes the place of the object, discarding it as something not actually part of war itself.¹⁴

Three features of this abstract definition make clear that Clausewitz’s notion cannot be regarded as universal to all war.¹⁵ First, it demands a two-way fight between one side and another, as the image of the duel makes clear. Hence genuinely multiplayer conflicts, such as the recent war in Syria, are not comprehended.

13 Clausewitz, *On War*, 89.

14 Clausewitz, *On War*, 75.

15 These factors differ from the debate over the universality of the trinity as it has developed since the 1990s, which tends to focus on the state versus nonstate issue. See Bassford, “Tip-Toe through the Trinity: The Strange Persistence of Trinitarian Warfare,” Clausewitz.com, January 5, 2017, <https://www.clausewitz.com/mobile/trinity8.htm>; and Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War: The Most Radical Reinterpretation of Armed Conflict since Clausewitz* (New York: Free Press, 1991). On the debate, see Christopher Daase, “Clausewitz and Small Wars” in *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Second, the idea assumes the enemy is a unified entity. If not already evident in the image of the enemy personified as a wrestler, this assumption must follow from the claim that war is an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will. The assumption here is that the enemy himself is imagined as having a “will” that can be compelled through military action in war to accept a given political outcome. This image fits badly with war against networked terrorist groups, where military action against one part of the network may well have no effect on the network as a whole, precisely because one is not dealing with a unified entity, but a network. To the extent that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the so called war on terror, have involved the use of force against networked terrorist groups, they resist inclusion in Clausewitz’s abstract definition of war.

Third, this definition is combat-centric: combat is the only means of war.¹⁶ Of course, Clausewitz is talking about the abstract nature of war here, and he may well accept that diplomacy and other nonviolent means have a role to play in more limited forms of war. But, in *On War*, he devotes virtually no attention to such nonviolent means. To the extent that nonviolent means have been central to various types of conflict, from the Cold War to the kind of contemporary “hybrid warfare” conducted, for example, by Russia—and the fact that such means as economic sanctions and cyber-resources are today increasingly effective as tools of statecraft—they are not accounted for in Clausewitz’s abstract definition of war.

In summary, Clausewitz’s account of war identifies a two-way military fight between unified entities. These unified entities are primarily imagined as states, as is clear by the association of each part of the trinity with a part of the state at war (i.e. government, people, army). Indeed, even when Clausewitz contemplated insurgency, he assumed that insurgents would fight on behalf of their state.¹⁷ That said, if a nonstate actor is a unified entity rather than a network, one might well see the entity as included within Clausewitz’s abstract definition of war.

Yet, if Clausewitz’s abstract account of war is not universal, what about his broad concept of the total phenomenon of war in reality, as represented in the trinity: is that universal to all war? A simple answer is no, given how the total phenomenon is but the abstract concept moderated by the trinity, and so is not a universal concept of war for exactly the same reasons as the abstract concept is not. That said, one might nonetheless ask whether the trinity on its own can attach to other types of war, beyond those within Clausewitz’s abstract account of war.

The problem one immediately encounters here is, what does one mean by other types of war in the abstract, beyond those identified in Clausewitz’s definition? We can say, based on the analysis above, that in a negative sense, these are wars that are not two-way but genuinely multiplayer, in which the enemy is not a unified entity, or in which

¹⁶ That is made explicit in Clausewitz, *On War*, 95.

¹⁷ Hew Strachan argues that even Clausewitz’s treatment of insurrections is framed in terms of an extension of state-on-state warfare, where the people continue the state’s struggle through unconventional means. Hew Strachan, *Clausewitz’s On War, A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), 182. On Clausewitz’s view of small wars, see Sebastián Kaempf, “Lost through Non-Translation: Bringing Clausewitz’s Writings on ‘New Wars’ Back In,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 22, no. 4 (October 2011): 548–73, doi:10.1080/09592318.2011.599164.

combat is not the only means. But, that still does not provide a positive definition. Furthermore, and more importantly, this clarification does not tell us why Clausewitz's account of war in the abstract and other types of war in the abstract should both be understood as war: what is this higher-level account of war's abstract nature? There are two ways to answer this question, which will in turn tell us if the trinity is indeed universal to all types of war.

The first way is to stay within the realm of abstract definitions of war's nature, and thus to come up with a universal definition of war that focuses on an element, or set of elements, that all wars must have in common. While I am skeptical that such a perfect definition exists, the essence of any such definition would be based on the element of collective political violence, notwithstanding that each of those terms is to an extent subjective.

The second way moves outside of the realm of abstract thought and rather traces the conceptual varieties in the meaning of war over time, like a family tree; although, what counts as war will, of course, also be subjective in this approach. This approach does not seek a single universal definition of war. It merely identifies as empirical facts the whole universe of phenomena that have been called war (or their equivalent in other languages), and classifies them according to the way the term was used in historical context. Of course, this approach is subjective too, in that what has been called war has meant different things to different people at different times, not to mention linguistic subjectivity.

The key difference between the first and second approach is that while the first seeks to exclude all differences to achieve a universal definition of war, the second actively looks for differences in its classification. This second approach is fundamentally attuned to distinctions in the sociopolitical context in which war takes place.

Key types of distinction in this regard are legal classifications of war. Before 1945, for example, the idea of a "state of war" demanded, at least in legal theory, declared war between sovereign states. Indeed, the very term "regular war" (as distinct from irregular war) originates in the idea of a state of war. The term was coined by the Swiss international lawyer Emer de Vattel (1714–67), who changed the Latin *bellum solemne* (formal war) in the work of Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), into the French *guerre en forme* (war in due form), which he also called *guerre réglée* (regulated or regular war).¹⁸

Yet, on the first page of *On War*, Clausewitz expressly dismissed law as irrelevant.¹⁹ He says international law is barely worth mentioning, and that law only has force within the state, which further implies that the type of war he is dealing with is interstate. Clausewitz's dismissal of international law is ironic because it provided the basic category of regular war that was his main focus, that is, two-way fighting between states. Indeed, the idea of war as a duel, or as an analogy to litigation, which is another analogy Clausewitz relies upon, is routinely encountered in the work of international lawyers in the two centuries

18 Emer de Vattel, *Le Droit de Gens, ou, Principes de la loi Naturelle, Appliqués à la Conduite et aux Affaires des Nations et des Souverains* (Buffalo, NY: W. S. Hein, 1995), 507.

19 Clausewitz, *On War*, 75.

before Clausewitz.²⁰ In this respect, Clausewitz's account of the nature of war would have surprised no one in his day as a standard abstract description of regular war.

Conversely, Clausewitz wrote nothing about the wars some European powers fought in distant colonies, let alone about measures short of war, which was also a legally defined category outside a formal state of war that tended to come about in the context of the maritime naval and commercial competition between European powers associated with imperial expansion.²¹ Given that Prussia did not have an overseas empire, or any serious naval capability, Clausewitz's silence with regards to the imperial dimension of the European experience of war is unremarkable, but does not change the fact that he said nothing about a large expanse of the European experience of war in his day.

Conversely, Clausewitz's dismissal of domestic law is not ironic, since he recognized it had force within the state, but he does not write about war within the state in *On War*. However, today many contemporary conflicts are internal conflicts in which the domestic law of the local state matters a great deal. In Afghanistan, for example, Afghan law governs the detention process, including the evidentiary requirements. More generally, Afghan law significantly restricts what coalition forces can realistically do. If coalition forces are working with a corrupt local official, for example, the local coalition commander, having no authority to do so under Afghan law, cannot directly fire the official.

There is an open-ended range of types of war according to this second approach of sketching a universal account of war. Beyond variety in legal classification, one could look at religious, cultural, economic, social and geopolitical classifications of war, and so on. It seems clear, for example, that religious wars—past and present—have different characteristics to nonreligious wars, and no doubt one could make further distinctions therein. From this perspective, new types of war are not a problem for the coherence of the concept, but responsive to differences in the sociopolitical context in which war takes place. Does the use of autonomous weapon systems, for instance, demand new categorical distinctions in war? Either way, the answer tells us something about what war is or is not.

Furthermore, these historical classifications of war can overlap. A religious war, for example, might be several other types, too, whether regular or irregular, hybrid in its means, or combat-centric, and so on. In short, like a human being, a war can have several aspects to its character—if character is the framework one wants to use to account for variety and change—in contrast to a phenomenon's permanent nature, which really just means common features across examples of the phenomenon as it appears in historical reality.

Finally, note how these two ways of arriving at a universal account of war are not mutually exclusive, but depend on one another. The abstract

20 For example two centuries before Clausewitz, Grotius writes: "War is the state or situation of those . . . who dispute by force of arms. . . . This agrees very well with the etymology of the word; for the Latin word *bellum* (war) comes from the old word *duellum* (a duel)." Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, ed. Richard Tuck (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2005), 134–35. On Clausewitz's analogy of war as a form of litigation, which again is a standard idea in international law from Grotius onwards, see Clausewitz, *On War*, 357–58.

21 Clausewitz, *On War*, 98.

account of war tries to find common features across all the presentations of war as it has presented itself in historical reality. Conversely, the historical account demands an abstract standard to identify the edges of its universe of what counts as war. Hence the term “war” is frequently used linguistically in ways everyone would agree are outside this universe because the term is used in a different way, or by loose analogy, or for merely rhetorical impact—a “war on cancer” for example.

We can now return to the question of whether the trinity applies universally to all types of war, regardless of the fact that in *On War* itself, the concept is presented within an abstract account of war that is clearly not universal. In my view, the trinity does apply universally, but not as a universal account of all the normative sources—the dominant tendencies that are similar to codes of law—that inform war in reality. When I say it applies universally, I mean I cannot imagine a proposed abstract universal definition of war that does not present a phenomenon in which the trinity’s three dominant tendencies do not apply. However, when I say it is not a universal account of all the normative sources that inform war in reality, I mean there exist other normative sources in war’s sociopolitical context, such as geopolitics (as distinct from policy), law, religion, culture, economics, robotics, and so on, that can also potentially inform what a given war *is*.

One might argue that Clausewitz himself acknowledged the possibility that other normative sources from the sociopolitical context in which war took place could inform the character of war beyond those normative sources identified in the trinity. Hence, he writes in book 8 how “the aims a belligerent adopts, and the resources he employs, must be governed by the particular characteristics of his own position; but they will also conform to the spirit of the age and to its general character. Finally, they must always be governed by the general conclusions to be drawn from the nature of war itself.”²² However, whether this was in fact Clausewitz’s subjective view is beyond the scope of this article, and not relevant to our purposes. Whether Clausewitz meant it or not, while it is suggested here that the trinity applies to all wars, it is also suggested that the trinity should not be taken as an exclusive account of the normative sources that potentially inform the character of a given war.

Clausewitz’s view of war in the trinity, which resists its reduction to scientific models, is a fundamentally important insight. In this light, the most useful way to think about war is to read about its history, and thus come to understand it in different historical contexts that serve as analogies, or distinctions, to the present day. This is an exercise in historical judgement, not scientific logic. It fits with the fact that Clausewitz himself wrote military history, and relied upon it for vicarious experience to inform his analysis in *On War*.²³

Nonetheless, the scientific mode of approaching war resurfaces from time to time, with predictably negative consequences. Look at Robert McNamara’s systems analysis approach during the Vietnam War, for example. The trinity also inhibits “big-hand, small-map” strategy, in which one forgets that war acts upon real people, who have their

22 Clausewitz, *On War*, 594.

23 On Clausewitz the military historian, see Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz’s Puzzle: The Political Theory of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2007), 32.

own story, and will not simply submit to the use of force as understood through some quasiscientific model. One might think of the failure of neoconservative projects to violently reshape the Middle East in the image of Western democracies, for example.

That said, the trinity has its limits. It says nothing about a range of normative sources that potentially inform the character of war, such as law, religion, and robotics, that lie outside the trinity. These considerations, when they arise, can be fundamental, too. For example, the idea of a criminal enemy is a fundamentally different notion to a noncriminal enemy. That much is clear if one but contrasts the normality of collecting evidence on a battlefield in a counterinsurgency to how odd such a notion typically would be during an interstate war, and what each of those scenarios implies for how that conflict will end. Fighting criminals with force is a form of armed governance, which is a far more open-ended idea than the use of force against regular enemies, who do not fall within one's jurisdiction to invigilate or govern. And this rather fundamental legal difference is but one feature of one normative source outside the trinity.

In sum, while there is still real value in Clausewitz's account of the trinity, one should not make a fetish out of it, nor out of the persona of Clausewitz himself, whose writings are unfortunately all too often treated in a quasireligious manner as if departure from a given canon of interpretation is some kind of sin. That attitude only frustrates clear appreciation of what parts of his theory of war still work, and which do not, or need adaption or extension. *On War* is simply a text, and should be read unsentimentally in its own context, retaining what works, if necessary by adaptation or analogy to new situations, but distinguishing what does not.

Networks, Hierarchies, and Victory in Clausewitz's Theory of Warfare

Clausewitz's theory of war assumes certain types of situations that his theory of warfare was designed to work within. As noted above, the basic situation was a two-way military fight between unified entities, who would typically be states. There is not space here to deal with the entirety of the applicability of Clausewitz's theory of warfare to contemporary conflict. Rather, I will focus on but one element which is particularly relevant today, namely, his concept of victory.²⁴

Our start point here is that Clausewitz's abstract definition of war does not account for situations in which the enemy is not a unified entity. Following General Stanley McChrystal's insightful distinction between hierarchical and networked enemies, one can say Clausewitz's definition of war assumes a hierarchical enemy.²⁵ Against a hierarchical enemy, military action on the battlefield tingles up the nervous system to the political leadership at the top. This connectedness is what ultimately allows military action to translate into political effect in a clear sequence in which war sets conditions for peace. The moment of translation is

²⁴ For a detailed account of Clausewitz's concept of victory, see Beatrice Heuser, "Clausewitz's Ideas of Strategy and Victory," in Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*.

²⁵ See Stanley A. McChrystal, et al., *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

the moment of victory, which comprehends a military and a political dimension; that is, the battlefield result is locked into a political result because the enemy as a whole—the entire hierarchy—recognizes the verdict of battle (whether that verdict is decisive or not).

A hierarchical enemy is presupposed in any strategic theory based on Clausewitz, given how he assumed the enemy to be a unified entity. This assumption provided the basis for his most important strategic concept, the center of gravity, which necessarily presupposed the enemy had a “will,” in the sense that it was a unified entity. Thus, Clausewitz envisaged the military strategist striking at the enemy’s center of gravity to translate a military result into a political result because it was a physical representation of the center of the enemy’s will: “By constantly seeking out the center of his power . . . will one really defeat the enemy.”²⁶ The location of the center of gravity was wherever the enemy’s will could be defeated, which would normally require destruction of the enemy’s main force, but it could also involve the occupation of the capital, or influencing communal interests in the case of an alliance. In this way, the center of gravity provided for a unified concept of victory: because the enemy’s military defeat was translated into a political result binding on the enemy as a whole—for Clausewitz understood the enemy to be a unified whole.

Now consider the position of victory in relation to the networked enemy. When the enemy is not a vertical hierarchy but a relatively flat network, while military action may produce localized political effect against localized contours of political leadership within the network, other parts of the network might well ignore that effect, and keep fighting. This condition makes it very hard to translate military effect into decisive political effect, for the very notion of decision in this context implies that it is binding, not ignored. The United States has degraded the core of al-Qaeda, but many of its franchises are still fighting, or have mutated into new groups. The same can be said about the Islamic State and radical jihadi terrorist networks more broadly.

One can try to force a networked enemy into traditional strategic models based on the hierarchical paradigm of the enemy by treating all people even loosely connected to a network as if they were a single enemy, and make a massive commitment to defeat the entire network militarily. However, this approach has the effect of aggregating constituencies who may not otherwise have strong links to one another, and treating them as if they were a single entity. The chances are, one will inflate the size of the problem and be fighting for a long time while disabling one’s own ability to exploit a networked enemy’s greatest vulnerability, which is precisely the fact that it can be broken up as a network along the lines of its internal fissures. Against this temptation, a better approach is to disaggregate the various parts of the enemy to understand them on their own terms, which rightly was David Kilcullen’s central point in *The Accidental Guerilla*.²⁷

If we take an aggregate-and-destroy-the-network approach anyway, victory simply comes to mean physical destruction: there is no need to

26 Clausewitz, *On War*, 596.

27 David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (London: Hurst, 2009).

bind an enemy into a political settlement if they have been physically destroyed, or at least severally degraded to the point of no longer posing a threat worth fighting. So military force can be decisive in this qualified sense against a networked enemy, yes. But, networked insurgents will rarely fight Western forces in conventional battle, preferring to perform hit-and-run attacks while hiding within civilian populations. So one must be clear that the consequences of achieving decision through brute force alone is likely wide-scale loss of civilian life in a manner that may well be morally, if not legally, repugnant to Western publics.

Moreover, the brute force approach assumes a networked enemy can all be targeted militarily in the first place. That is unlikely to be the case if the enemy is a globalized network. Rather, it is a recipe for forever war, which as the name suggests, is never going to be decisive. In short, if one simply treats a networked enemy as if it were a hierarchical enemy, victory becomes a purely military concept without a political counterpart. Victory understood in decisive terms becomes an ever receding light at the end of the tunnel of forever war. Of course, no wars actually have lasted forever; the point is that forever war simply identifies a type of war with no apparent mechanism of decision.

Conclusion

In one sense, *On War* represents Clausewitz's attempt to understand a massive transformation in the character of war as he had experienced it in his lifetime. With the withering Prussian defeat at the Battle of Jena in 1806 in mind, he writes:

In the eighteenth century...war was still an affair for governments alone. . . . At the onset of the nineteenth century, peoples themselves were in the scale on either side. . . . Such a transformation of war might have led to new ways of thinking about it. In 1805, 1806, and 1809 men might have recognized that total ruin was a possibility—indeed it stared them in the face. . . . They did not, however, change their attitude sufficiently. . . . They failed because the transformations of war had not yet been sufficiently revealed by history.²⁸

As Hew Strachan's biography of *On War* tells us, Clausewitz saw as fundamental the social changes of the French Revolution, which produced the citizen-soldier and the idea of the nation in arms. Allied to expansive ideological claims, war ripped apart European order from 1789 to 1815. Clausewitz's achievement was to provide a flexible account of war that could comprehend the lived reality of near-absolute war without claiming all wars would always be like this, and might well be far more limited. On this basis, Clausewitz offered military strategists in his day a set of strategic principles to translate military outcomes into political outcomes, that is, a clear account of victory in war.

However, the fragmented, networked enemy, produced by today's information revolution—which might well turn out to be just as transformative as the French Revolution, or the Industrial Revolution—fits badly into Clausewitz's abstract account of war as a two-way military fight between unified entities. This enemy is not new but well-known to the Western tradition of strategic thought in the imperial and small-wars context—though historically known more at a local or a regional level

28 Clausewitz, *On War*, 583–84.

than at the global-level networks of today's Information Age. But, this latter context was not the type of war about which Clausewitz wrote. The center of gravity concept breaks down in relation to the fragmented, networked enemy. By plugging in modern operational doctrine to the wrong historical tradition, we misunderstand the conflicts we fight in. Regardless of abstract theory, the further the factual reality of early twenty-first century combat—war as it has actually been lived by several thousand Western soldiers—departs from the interstate land warfare of early nineteenth century Europe, the harder it is to understand today's warfare in Clausewitzian terms, even if the trinity in the specific sense suggested above applies universally to all war.

Clausewitz updated the theory of war and warfare to account for the experience of his own day. Today, the same ambition to update the theory of war and warfare in light of lived experience can safely be described as Clausewitzian.