

War – Continuity in Change, and Change in Continuity

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War can only be understood holistically. If one focuses on continuity in change, one is near certain to undervalue the change in continuity. One has to be bifocal. Carl von Clausewitz is uncompromising on this matter:

But in war more than in any other subject we must begin by looking at the nature of the whole; for here more than elsewhere the part and the whole must always be thought of together.¹

The subject of most interest here is future war, all of it. Future war will include both change and continuity from the past. Many people have difficulty understanding the relationship between continuity and change; this article will try to provide some useful guidance. Similarly, satisfactory comprehension of the connection between theory and practice is frequently missing.² These deficiencies in intellectual grasp can be important and damaging to national security.

The core problem for those who are charged with the strategic function of conducting defense planning for national security is the need to prepare prudently for a future about which almost everything in general is known, but nothing is known in reliable detail. We know everything that there is to know about war, unsurprisingly, since we have variable access to at least 2,500 years of bloody history. But we know nothing, literally zero, for certain about the wars of the future, even in the near-term. There are question marks everywhere as to why war, with whom, when, where, how, and with what? The same circumstance exists regarding outcomes. Obviously, the further away from today one peers and tries to predict, the foggier the course of future events becomes. Crystal balls that work reliably are hard to find, while astrology, alas, is apt to disappoint also. But,

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ignorant though they are, defense planners are obliged to make guesses about the future.³

So, how does one attempt to improve guesswork for the future concerning war, warfare, and strategy? The most basic answer is that one can only educate in the hope that judgment will be improved so that good, as opposed to poor, strategic choices will be made. You cannot know today what choices in defense planning you should make that will be judged correct in ten or 20 years' time. Why? Because one cannot know what is unknowable. Rather than accept a challenge that is impossible to meet, however, pick one that can be met well enough. Specifically, develop policy-makers, defense planners, and military executives so that they are intellectually equipped to find good enough solutions to the problems that emerge or even erupt unpredictably years from now. And, one has to emphasize, develop and maintain capabilities sufficiently adaptable to cope with a range of security challenges, since particular threats and opportunities cannot be anticipated with high confidence.

The article presents nine major points, or claims, and concludes by offering some observations on the major current and near-term future characteristics of war and warfare with caveats appended.

The Argument

War has a constant nature, but an ever-changing character.

War comprises more or less, but always to some degree, organized violence motivated by political considerations. War is about politics, and politics is about the distribution of power—who has how much of it, what they do with it, and what the consequences are. It is essential to distinguish war and warfare, singular, from wars and episodes of warfare, plural. Thus far, there is no general theory of war that is very helpful in explaining the “why” and the “when” of particular wars. The theory of war also has to be the theory of peace. The concept of war only makes sense in relation to its opposite. If your favorite general theory of war seems good enough to explain why wars occurred in 1914 and 1939, how good is it at explaining persuasively why great wars did not start in 1913 and 1938? Many people confuse the nature of war with its character. The former is universal and eternal and does not alter, whereas the latter is always in flux. This distinction is not just a fine academic point, with no real-world resonance worthy of note. It matters enormously if you believe that your favorite idea or innovative technology is going to change the nature, as opposed to only the character, of war. For an obvious example, a legion of theorists have argued that air power would change, or is changing, the nature of war. This claim is non-

sense, at least it is if one is conceptually disciplined. Clausewitz, for once, is less than crystal clear. The great Prussian wrote, confusingly, that “the nature of war is complex and changeable” and “all wars are things of the same nature.”⁴ The author believes that Clausewitz was cor-

Future war will include both change and continuity from the past.

rect in the second claim. If you believe that different wars are examples of different types of political and social behavior, you invite serious error in understanding the continuities amidst the more or less obvious changes over time and in different contexts. There is only a single general theory of war, because war—past, present, and future—is but a single species of subject. Air power has made a huge difference to the conduct of warfare, but in a hundred years it has not altered the nature of warfare or war. Even the advent and maturing of the nuclear revolution has not changed the nature of warfare, and this class of weaponry poses a more fundamental menace to the nature of war than does air or missile power.

Every war is distinctive and typically waged in several styles.

Throughout history belligerents have functioned strategically, striving to achieve desired ends, by suitable ways using available means.⁵ Different security communities make distinctive choices as to how they will compete and, if necessary, fight given their practicable options, their circumstances, and the discretion that their enemies allow them. Probably most wars contain variants of what one could term regular and irregular styles in combat. The menu of warfare and strategy options for style (or type) is relatively unchanging over the centuries.⁶ The technologies and tactics change, but ancient, medieval, and early modern choices are comprehensible to us today. We can well-enough rationalize in contemporary terms Greek, Roman, and Byzantine strategic and tactical preferences.

War has persisting and universal contexts that explain and drive it with historical specificity.

It is useful to explain war with reference to seven contexts; they organize the complex subject well enough for holistic understanding. The contexts are: political, social-cultural, economic, technological, military-strategic, geographical-geopolitical/geostrategic, and historical. Every war has to be understood contextually; it is not a standalone, came-from-nowhere happening, itself providing all relevant meaning. In every war the relative weighting of importance among the seven contexts will differ. The general

theory of war tries to advise on what to look for; it cannot tell what will be found in a particular case. This is not a fault of general theory, rather it is the nature of the exercise and the boundary of general theoretical assistance.

*War is eternally and universally possible because human beings in politically organized societies can always be sufficiently motivated by some mixture of “fear, honor, and interest” to choose to fight.*⁷

Thucydides’s general explanation of the principal motives in statecraft and for war is as relevant to the twenty-first century as it was in his time, 2,400 years ago. We know that there will be wars and warfare and a need for strategy in the future, because Thucydides’s famous triptych of motives to wage war is, unfortunately, all too alive and well. Human nature and the nature of human society have no more changed since Thucydides’s period than has the nature of war.

*Clausewitz explained well enough the enduring nature of war in terms of two unstable trinities: passion, chance, and reason, which he primarily associated with the people, the army and its commander, and the government or policy, respectively.*⁸

Clausewitz claimed logically only that war, to be war—and not something else, recreational or criminal violence, say—must serve policy (politics). He did not claim that policy has to dominate either the popular will or the behavior of the army. It should do so, but frequently that is not the case. Clausewitz’s primary trinity, which one can translate as comprising popular feeling, military performance, and political direction, is the centerpiece of the general theory of war. In common with Thucydides’s trio of “fear, honor, and interest,” this Clausewitzian threesome can serve as a skeleton key to open many rooms in “the whole house of war” that otherwise would be hard to understand.⁹ In addition to passion, chance, and reason, Clausewitz also provides such valuable items for the conceptual toolkit as the proposition that war always has a climate with principal characteristics comprising danger, exertion, chance, and uncertainty, and the compound idea of “friction.”¹⁰

The general theory of strategy so educates strategists that they are intellectually enabled to invent, design, and execute historically specific strategies that may succeed.

Again citing Clausewitz, the general theory of strategy does not specify what to do, but it does advise on how to think about what to do. Education

in strategy is a conceptual enabler; it is theory or education for practice. Just as one has to recognize that there is war in general, universal and eternal in its nature, but ever variable in its particular character, so too is strategy both general in nature and variable from case to case. Because general theory explains the whole enduring nature of a subject, it is both always authoritative and requires translation to fit within the particular context. It is important to remember the key singular-plural distinction between the one general theory of strategy and the unlimited number of particular strategies that rivals and belligerents devise. This general-particular distinction applies to functional and geographically focused theories. For example, there is a general theory of air power, while there have been many particular air power strategies keyed to historically individual contexts. General strategic theory encompasses a general air power theory that should lay the groundwork for practice in the form of actual air power strategies.

Strategy is very difficult for many reasons, one of which is that it is neither a question of politics nor fighting power, but rather the conversion of military effort into political reward.

This is a universal and eternal challenge. What is the exchange rate to convert military performance, measured how, into desired political outcome? Whether one is at war against a state or an insurgency, whether one wages regular or irregular warfare, or more likely both, this is the primary challenge. The purpose of fighting is not to win a military victory, necessary though that usually is. Rather the purpose of fighting is to secure a better peace than one enjoyed before. To reject or neglect this logic is to find yourself in the situation of fighting a war that has no meaning outside itself. Recall the soldier's ditty from the Great War of 1914-18, "We're 'ere because we're 'ere because we're 'ere." Because strategy is hard to grasp as a concept and exceedingly difficult to do well, it is frequently the case that governments carry out policy (meaning politics), and they order fighting, but no one really connects the two with consistent purposeful direction; there is a vacuum where strategy ought to be.

The guiding principle for defense planning is "minimum regrets."

The gold standard for good enough defense planning is to get the biggest decisions correct enough so that one's successors will lament "if only..." solely with regard to past errors that are distinctly survivable. The defense planner has to balance the commitment of resources to provide military capabilities that he knows are needed today, with buying resources for the future as insurance against more or less distant and uncertain perils. The

former comprise demonstrated needs now; the latter is guesswork. What will the nation be pleased to have available in its military toolkit five, 10, or 20 years from now? Since one cannot answer that question precisely, the best one can do is prepare for some very unwelcome problems that are anticipated as possibilities by means of planning to buy the ability to cope with these kinds of challenges. One needs to buy a military force with the attributes of adaptability, flexibility, agility, and fungibility. When your successors discover that what they have at hand is not a close fit with what optimally they require, they should be able to work around the difficulty by finding compensation in other, albeit suboptimal, capabilities; looking hard for strategy and tactics that privilege what happens to be available; and begging, borrowing, and buying what is needed from abroad.

There is a “conceptual carousel,” a fairground-like roundabout of strategic ideas, good, bad, and both.

So large and industrious is the international community of defense and security practitioners and commentators that one can feel overwhelmed by the cascade of new-sounding concepts and schools of thought, as well as by the sheer volume of theories, analyses, commentaries, and instant histories of still-moving events. For an unfamiliar-seeming, if actually rather banal precept, consider the thought that “history never sleeps,” every passing moment is a “strategic” one. Thinking of familiar but still useful dictums, there is considerable merit in the thought that “just when we found the answer, they changed the question.” That thought is especially relevant to the debate regarding, and the practice of, counterinsurgency (COIN). Are the historical discontinuities, the apparent nonlinearities, sufficiently powerful to invalidate much of what “classical” COIN theory provides as education and the dependent doctrine advises?¹¹ Just when one succeeds in grasping the character of the largely irregular strategic challenges of the 2000s, with its “accidental guerrillas,” one finds oneself in the foreign world of the 2010s where the problems may be significantly different.¹² This means that yesterday’s doctrinal wisdom most likely will get one killed and will also lead to mission failure.

Travelling full circle in this discussion, on the one hand, there is a general theory of war and a general theory of strategy that are eternally and universally valid. On the other hand, they only have authority as teaching tools to enable highly variable translation for dealing with specific, changing, historical circumstances. There is a fixed stock, or arsenal, of strategic ideas that one can think of as tools in one’s conceptual toolkit for use in today’s unique strategic contexts. Triggered by the demand for new ideas to deal with new problems, the concepts industry, official and

unofficial, faithfully delivers new-sounding ideas to meet new-looking challenges. In fact, the ideas will certainly not be new, though their wording might be. The real-world strategic challenges assuredly will be more or less new to the people confronting them, even though they are most unlikely to be genuinely novel. If, however, one is faced with a complex COIN problem for which one is significantly underprepared theoretically, doctrinally, and materially, it will be small consolation to know that truly there is nothing much really new about this dangerous situation. Old wisdom is forgotten, lost, ignored, and probably hard to translate into useful guidance for today, so one has to learn what already is in the library but has not been accessed of late. Of course, if you believe that the future shows an advance from, rather than with, past wisdom, you are not likely to be open to education from the classical theorists on war and strategy. It is worth mentioning that the carousel of concepts circulates both good ideas and bad ones. Unfortunately, what once was a good idea in a particular past context may well be a bad idea if applied today in a new environment.

Brave New World?

There is nothing of fundamental importance that is genuinely new about war and strategy in the twenty-first century (not even nuclear weapons). The stage sets, the dress, the civilian and military equipment, and some of the language are always changing, but the human, political, and strategic plots, alas, remain all too familiar. The argument is simultaneously profoundly conservative yet thoroughly comfortable with recognition, and sometimes even welcoming, of change. This analysis will close by citing five significant changes in the contexts that shape contemporary war and strategy, and by pointing to three caveats that should help encourage respect for more classical analysis.

- The development of cyber power that is becoming ever more necessary for the creation of wealth and the functioning of armed forces already is resulting in cyber warfare. With only trivial exceptions, all future wars will harbor integral cyber warfare.
- The maturing of orbital space capabilities for science, commerce, and military power guarantees that space warfare, in common with cyber warfare, will be in our future.
- The rise of a global electronic media with real-time access to events, or nearly so, and the ability to reach audiences globally means a political and cultural-moral audit of behavior that will be an enduring feature of future strategic history.

- An information-led revolution in military affairs (RMA) is well under way and is unstoppable. The strategic ramifications of this RMA include the dissemination of relatively high-technology weaponry and support equipment to nonstate and weak-state belligerents. The computer-based, information technology-led RMA does not mean enduring US military hegemony for strategic and political challenges, as some people naively believed in the 1990s.

- Belligerents who find themselves materially challenged will seek strategic compensation primarily by means of adopting asymmetric grand and military strategies that might offset their disadvantages. Irregular warfare, including terrorism, and threats by weapons of mass destruction are the most obvious contemporary asymmetric options. There is nothing new about the concept of asymmetry in war, warfare, and strategy. Sensible combatants always look for a winning edge that can mask and offset their deficiencies.

- Interstate war and warfare continue to plague the human race. Even war between great powers is possible, given the political fuel lurking in the twenty-first century in the deadly and familiar classical Thucydidesan categories of “fear, honor, and interest.” But new technologies very likely will retire, indeed have retired, the tactical relevance of much modern military experience. For a leading example, contemporary kinetic air (and missile) power is now so deadly in the precision with which it can be targeted that just about any enemy assets that can be located can be violently removed from the opponent’s order of battle. Regular, heavy ground forces will not clash in mighty battle, because rival air power(s) will pre-empt such an engagement. Nonetheless, future large-scale and usually “conventional” regular and irregular styles in warfare will still be possible. They will be waged by information technology-led and -enabled military forces, in cyber space as well as to, in, and from orbital space, and in styles notably irregular when compared with most interstate strategic practices in modern times.

Three Closing Caveats

- Particular styles in warfare wax and wane, and wax again, endlessly. An irregular style is dominant for now, but that says nothing of much predictive value regarding the twenty-first century beyond today.

- Every new set of technological marvels brings with it specific novel challenges. For every shiny new solution, new problems will be discovered. The principal reason why this is always so is because of the inconvenience represented by the enemy.

- War/warfare is a duel and a dynamic, unique, and unpredictable product of interaction between friendly and unfriendly forces, together with

the workings of friction and chance. No matter what else changes, we can count on historical continuity in the form of a self-willed adversary.

NOTES

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, ed. and trans. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), 75.

2. See Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010).

3. On the challenge of defense planning, see Talbot C. Imlay and Monica Duffy Toft, eds., *The Fog of Peace and War Planning: Military and Strategic Planning under Uncertainty* (New York: Routledge, 2006), and Colin S. Gray, “Strategic Thoughts for Defense Planners,” *Survival*, 52 (June-July 2010), 159-78.

4. Clausewitz, 90, 606.

5. See Harry R. Yarger, *Strategy and the National Security Professional: Strategic Thinking and Strategy Formulation in the 21st Century* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2008).

6. See Gray, *The Strategy Bridge*, 66.

7. Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, Robert B. Strassler, ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 43.

8. Clausewitz, 89.

9. The concept is borrowed gratefully from T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), 191.

10. Clausewitz, 104, 119-21.

11. See David Martin Jones and M. L. R. Smith, “Whose Hearts and Whose Minds? The Curious Case of Global Counter-Insurgency,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 33 (February 2010), 81-121, and John A. Nagl and Brian M. Burton, “Thinking Globally and Acting Locally: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Modern Wars—A Reply to Jones and Smith,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 33 (February 2010), 123-38.

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