



# ISSUE BRIEF

No. 123

January 2018

## Contribution of Sun Zi and Clausewitz to Modern Warfare



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### Introduction

Sun Zi and Clausewitz represent two poles of a timeline, in between whom the idea of war has transcended from pre-industrial to post-industrial age. The history of war is as old as the history of human existence itself. Sun Zi was a 5th century before Christ (B.C) Taoist general, while Clausewitz was a 19th century Prussian army officer who codified a prescriptive military classic in an attempt to understand and analyze war and not just operationalize it. War can be described as a phenomenon, a competition and clash of human psychological understanding to survive. Hence, war reflects the philosophical aspect of human existence and their make. War is not only fought for mere resources, but also on the pretext of superior belief. When two belligerent parties are engaged in battle, they reveal their belief. And the jostle continues for maintaining some kind of superiority at every level, that is, from philosophical to technical. This is what strategists try to understand about war and its phenomenon. For example, Sun Zi's The Art of War reflects the Taoist beliefs

### *Key Points*

1. The evolution of philosophy of warfare from Sun Zi and Clausewitz is remarkable.
2. Sun Zi gave the essence of warfare while Clausewitz explained and analysed it.
3. Sun Zi and Clausewitz had emphasised the importance of strategic culture in warfare.
4. The concept of Soldier as a scholar was common to both of them.
5. Both wanted to have bloodless war using indirect means.

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in which balance of inner and external forces (Yin Yang) are explained as well as the discipline and intellectual prowess that lie at its core. On the other hand, Clausewitz was far from any effect of religion or philosophy, therefore, in his context there is no wrong or right war. It is just war. The use of human resource, training and operationalization of plans has been discussed in both with a certain degree of clarity and in detail. But they are fascinating in the way that they presented their ideas based on two different eras. Apart from the philosophical underpinnings, various aspects of war combat, that is, political, military and social have been given due weightage to understand their influence. In this essay, I have tried to discuss various aspects of Sun Zi's Art of War and Clausewitz's On War along with a brief comparison of their contribution to the history of war.

### Sun Zi's Art of War: Context, Philosophy in Modern Warfare

Sun Zi's Art of War is not a simple philosophical textbook underpinning the operational procedures to be followed for executing a successful military operation, rather it is beyond the nitty-gritty of operational fine print, if understood in the context of the belief system prevalent during the period it was written in<sup>1</sup>. It highlights the kind of national and strategic culture, the elites of the warring states had. Those cultures exerted influence in shaping the ambitions of the ruler, behaviour of the ruled and the elites responsible for the affairs of the state. The essence of Sun Zi's rules is based upon the philosophical tenets of both Confucianism and Taoism, which continued to influence both civil and military aspects of national life to a large extent<sup>2</sup>.

If one follows the regimental system of British military or that of the British Indian army in which the regiments were a close-knit group, based on a particular caste or martial race, one can understand

the role played by the philosophical aspects in training, discipline and mobilization of troops based on the code of their respective caste or religion. This is because caste, race and religion bind troops into an unbreakable bond and gives them a cause to fight for. In Sun Zi's context, these factors are replaced by the welfare activities and moral strength of the state. This has been explicated in his strategic assessment as the responsibilities of the civil and military leadership to uphold law, be humane and just, to develop an unshakable trust between the ruler and the ruled<sup>3</sup>. True to the core of Confucian and Taoist belief, Sun Zi argued the importance of both peace and war to maintain balance. But, unlike Hobbes' belief on anarchy till eternity, Sun Zi places his bet on diplomacy through the exchange of emissaries to prevent war and give peace a chance. It is the civilian leadership which can help to ensure and explore the opportunities of peace before using the military to opt for war as the last resort<sup>4</sup>.

The philosophical teachings of Sun Zi remain relevant to the study and conduct of modern warfare and to the concept of 'Soldier Scholar' so much so that, Gen. James Mattis of US Marine Corps, in an interview sworn allegiance to the effectiveness of Sun Zi's teachings in today's warfare<sup>5</sup>. Interestingly, some of the important aspects of modern-day war fighting, such as the use of spies, special forces, enhanced logistics, expeditionary troops, counter insurgency operations, can draw their philosophical essence from Sun Zi's The Art of War. For example, one can compare Sun Zi's diction on the use of traditional and nontraditional methods of war fighting with that of the special forces and the non-state actors (militia) in different permutations and combinations to win a war<sup>6</sup>. Even the most basics of laying an ambush are elucidated to an optimum use of troops till the ratio of both sides falls to 2:1<sup>7</sup>.

The concept of 'Soldier Scholar' though heard in military circles, for clarification can refer to the

words of former Indian air force Vice Marshal Arjun Subramaniam who explicated the necessity of future soldiers to read, write and research more to maintain an intellectual edge to 'stay ahead' and understand both past, present and future dynamics of warfare to 'stay alive'<sup>8</sup>. This is what Sun Zi, in his classic, emphasizes when he explains the five things that is measurement, assessment, calculation, comparison and victory that a general must consider while planning a war<sup>9</sup>.

Sun Zi's foresight of the future battlefield and his abhorrence for protracted war can be seen in today's counterinsurgency operations as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) deployed in the dusty plains and mountain ranges of Afghanistan had to face both physical and psychological challenges<sup>10</sup>. Also, the excessive use of force in the case of Iraq and Libya and destroying their basic security architecture have caused chaos, leading to a draining of US military resources in those regions. One can find mention of such contexts in expeditionary battles in Sun Zi's *The Art of War* in which, he argued that unless there is an intention to stay put, it is inadvisable to destroy an intact military force or the rudimentary security structure in place, as that would descend the region into chaos while putting strain on the attacking country's coffers. In this way, one brings the vagaries of war home<sup>11</sup>. He also laid emphasis on the civilian control of the military force while delineating a fine line that needs to be maintained in the decision-making system. For that, he argued that while it is imperative for the civilian leadership to ensure a humane and just rule, any interference in military command and control system will create confusion and chaos among the ranks and files<sup>12</sup>.

### **Clausewitz's On War: Clausewitzism in Modern Warfare**

The 19th century military classic written by Carl von Clausewitz, illustrating different attributes of a

conflict, can be best described as 'mechanics of war'. The Prussian general, had written this in-between the period 1818/1830, during his administrative role at the Berlin war college. This was the first time that an attempt was made to record and conceptualize different aspects of war in threadbare. Prior to this, only General Scharnhorst had compiled a field manual for the purpose of training for young officers. The difference between Scharnhorst's field manual and Clausewitz's *On War* is that, the latter is written with the intent of wide readership (strategic thinkers, politicians, academics, military officers) in mind, while the former focussed on military officers in training.

In his book, Clausewitz used understandings of past wars (French Revolution (1789/99), Napoleonic Wars (1803/1815), Seven Years' War (1756/63)) to analyze, frame and extrapolate the findings into his age of cannons and muskets. However, the significance lies in the attempt to theorize and formulate broad rules that dictate war. The objective of my analysis is to understand the applicability of those broad rules in today's warfare.

In his classic, Clausewitz has argued that war is the continuation of politics by other means. By this, he not only segregated the entire concept of force into political and military objectives, but also made the latter subservient to ambitions of the former. In his understanding, military is a tool which can be used to coerce and persuade an adversary to its extremes by political leadership in their realm of thought, while formulating the policies of diplomacy and war. For the first time, he introduced 'war' as an extension of a policy. It can be said, that 'war is a continuation of a policy by other means', because the policies adopted by the political leadership percolate down to the military institutions, which in turn derive their doctrine from it. And a fine blend of policy and doctrine give rise to the development of strategic culture in the security establishment of

a nation. The current debate around the strategic culture of major powers, like India, China, Australia, Japan, South Korea, signifies its importance as a step to understand the future course of the Asian security scenario<sup>13</sup>.

The importance of 'willpower' was given special attention by Clausewitz, as for him war was all about the 'game of will'. It is through war that the victor imposes his/her will on the losing side. During war, the will of the commander also plays a decisive role in developing either an offensive (positive) or defensive (negative) strategy. According to Clausewitz, true victory comes from defeating the enemy's will and in case of protracted war, it is imperative to win the will of the public to survive in the hostile environment. The function of the concept of will can be seen in case of counterinsurgency operations, where both public and the surrounding environment remain at odds against the counterinsurgency force. Similarly, the war can be long, continuous and exhaustive in the sense, that it drains both the military of its resources and the nation of its economy and peace. However, Clausewitz argued that a protracted war can also be fought by reducing the end objective limited to exhausting the enemy's will power. But contrary to it, when economics of war is taken into account, a long war has a negative influence on domestic politics unless, the political leadership is adamant on its military goals. Here, I would like to draw attention towards Clausewitz's penchant for indirect war during the French Revolution. He was not only impressed of the revolution by the French people, but also wanted to arm Prussian peasants and provoke them to revolt against Napoleon<sup>14</sup>. We already have the concept of hybrid warfare according to which, a war is conducted through proxies, as it can inflict considerable damage over the period of time with plausible deniability from the enemy state.

With a long experience in fighting battles both on the Prussian and Russian side, Clausewitz understood the cost of war and for that reason, he argues to use diplomacy to neutralize the adversary and its alliances while gaining new allies for oneself. War must be the last recourse of the wise, as he further argued that it must be fought after a thorough assessment of terrain, offensive and defensive gains and its overall consequences on the balance of power and the international law.

The role of civil military relations finds a clear mention in Clausewitz's military classic. He has argued for the separation of political objective from that of military and non-intervention of political leadership in military decisions. There should be a fine line between the two leaderships. The role of political leadership is to define the broad political objective and leave it on the military to plan for operations. He even argued for space to be left for political leadership to negotiate peace without war as far as possible.

Interestingly, Clausewitz has also argued on the level of intelligence in future commanders. He differentiates a nomadic warrior from a civilized and intellectual commander. For him, the achievement of political objective depends upon the commander in the battlefield and his clarity of thoughts to see through the fog of war. He expects a certain level of intellectual clarity, emotional intelligence and common sense in the officers operating at the strategizing level. This is akin to the concept of 'Soldier Scholar' discussed earlier.

### **Comparing Sun Zi and Clausewitz: Philosophy vs Mechanics of War**

The divide between eastern and western thought is noticeable in both the classics on the conduct of warfare. While Sun Zi discussed the broad guidelines of waging a successful war, with his

excessive inclination on the philosophical aspects of Taoism, Clausewitz was a professional soldier and had influence of neither religion nor belief. His analysis was based on the objective assessment of the situation and on the political and military objective of the state. The scientific advances in the 18th century Europe and the corresponding revolution in military technology had influenced his thinking and made him think of 'coefficients and factors' which can influence the outcome of war<sup>15</sup>. Also, the condition of morality ranked high in Sun Zi's epic than in Clausewitz's thinking, even though both aspired for a bloodless war. I shall discuss the similarities and differences between Clausewitz and Sun Zi as we move further in this section.

In either case, strategic assessment of one's capability with respect to the desired objective was deemed necessary. There are certain conditions to be fulfilled before planning a war. For example, both Clausewitz and Sun Zi gave primacy to political leadership, its objective and its policies as necessary conditions. But for Sun Zi, an absolute consensus was necessary between the civilian and military leadership, while Clausewitz stressed on the primacy of political will over that of the military leadership.

As per them, the concept of will dictates the outcome of war, among other conditions. The objective of victory was to be attained by destroying the enemy's will and by creating differences amongst its ranks. Both argued on winning people's will as a necessary condition to fight a long-distance war under a hostile environment. This is evident in case of counterinsurgency operations. The consequences of protracted war on the will of the military and political leadership were also discussed at length. But here, Sun Zi remains at odds with the Clausewitzian philosophy of minimization of the overall objective and exhausting the enemy's will to defend. However, the difference lies in Clausewitz's exclusive mention of will as a factor,

while Sun Zi made it a part of his approach through philosophical training. It is this 'will' in fine balance with the cognitive ability and war-fighting skills of a 'general' that makes him both brilliant and genius.

Both Sun Zi and Clausewitz aspired to have victory without war. Hence, they had a similar set of conditions as part of their assessment to evaluate the chances of getting into a war. The Art of War outlines five things that is, the way, the weather, the terrain and the discipline as part of its initial evaluation of the outcome of war. Even though Clausewitz understood the difficulty of overcoming the ambiguity of information and overwhelming emotions, his assessment involved an analysis of the type of war required, the weather, the terrain, the prospective positive or negative gain and a calm mind. Both have given preeminence to an extensive use of intelligence and spies to neutralize their adversary without firing a bullet, among other factors.

### Conclusion

There have been many points of convergence between Sun Zi and Clausewitz, each outlining the fundamental aspects of war. The essence lies in their consideration of various aspects of war, among which key ones are the division of political and military objectives of war. Their broad rules can be applied to different aspects of modern-day war fighting. The emergence of informationization of battlefield can be referred to as an attempt to reduce Clausewitzian fog of war by giving more clarity to the commander. Similarly, the use of information in the age of social media can help persuade public in support of leadership affirming the veracity of Sun Zi's art of deception. However in modern warfare, one can add the domain of cyberspace as the tenth ground to Sun Zi's nine grounds, creating a whole new subject of cyber warfare. Clausewitz's concept



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of will and his penchant for protracted war can be implemented through the use of proxies (non-state actors), mercenaries and insurgents using guerrilla tactics, with an expenditure far less compared to a

full-fledged conventional war. In short, both Sun Zi and Clausewitz have laid the basic foundation for understanding and conceptualizing the phenomenon of war.

### Notes

1. Thomas Cleary, *The Art of War* 1st edition (Boston, Massachusetts 02115: Shambhala Publications, 2005), p.11.
2. Ibid., p.11.
3. Ibid., p.35.
4. Ibid., p.34.
5. David Lauterborn, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, *Military History Magazine*, December 2016, <http://www.historynet.com/interview-with-general-james-mattis.htm>. Accessed on December 25, 2017.
6. Cleary, n.1, p.73.
7. Ibid., p.59.
8. Air Vice Marshal Arjun Subramaniam, "Soldiering is About Statecraft Too," April 2012, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/soldiering-is-about-statecraft-too/article3350126.ece>. Accessed on December 25, 2017.
9. Cleary, n.1, p.71.
10. Ibid., p.46.
11. Ibid., p.53.
12. Ibid., p.62.
13. J.A. Tellis, "Strategic Culture, National Security, and Policymaking in the Asia-Pacific," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016. Retrieved on January 01, 2018, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/10/27/strategic-culture-national-security-and-policymaking-in-asia-pacific-pub-66166>.
14. Carl von Clausewitz et al., *On War* (Great Britain: Oxford University Press, USA).
15. Clausewitz et al., n.14, p. 13.

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