

Clausewitz and Sun Tzu: Insights in Military Studies for Staff College Students

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Abstract

This article delves into the enduring relevance of the theories proposed by two renowned military thinkers for contemporary military professionals- Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, particularly to those at the mid-level officer ranks. Highlighting both shared and contrasting concepts, including war as an extension of policy, caution against prolonged conflicts, recognition of military genius, and appreciation of psychological factors, this article offers valuable insights for military practitioners in discerning and applying strategic principles in modern warfare. The paper explores the interplay between Clausewitz and Sun Tzu's perspectives and further provides a nuanced understanding of their theories, aiding military leaders in navigating the complexities of today's global security landscape.

Keywords

Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, Military studies, Warfare, Strategic principles, Global security.

Clausewitz and Sun Tzu are giants among military thinkers, whose select theories remain germane to 21st-century military professionals, including Staff College students. Some of their enduring, shared concepts include their assertions of war as an extension of policy; wariness of prolonged war; recognition of the military genius; and appreciation of psychological factors. At the same time, they also hold some contrasting views, including on the quest for the decisive battle; reliance on intelligence; and the ability to predict the outcome of wars. This article illuminates their shared insights into warfare, while highlighting key differences, thereby aiding the practitioner in the discernment and application of their pervasive concepts.

Clausewitz is best known for his unequivocal proclamation that war is "a true political instrument" (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 87). Sun Tzu, if not quite as explicit, nevertheless agrees that war is "the ultimate instrument of statecraft;" opening his timeless work by stating, "war is a matter of vital importance to the state" (Sun Tzu, 1963, p. 9). Military professionals may or may not agree that we are experiencing the vagaries of fourth-generation warfare today (Echevarria II, 2005). However, they do tend to concur that, as most armed forces doctrines describe: the uncertainty, ambiguity, and surprise that dominate the course of regional and global events make the nesting of military and political objectives even more relevant today (U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2013, p. I-10). Clemenceau's famous quip, "war is too important to be left to the generals," currently assumes particular gravity, with contemporary wars often requiring the coordinated, if not synchronized, mobilization of all elements of national power (Cohen, 2003, p. 54; U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2013). Likewise, the iterative political validation of military objectives can be particularly meaningful in helping states avoid drifting into 'quagmire wars' that are hard to terminate (Huber, 2002, p. 5).

Clausewitz and Sun Tzu would likely frown at the long duration of recent conflicts such as the war on terrorism. Clausewitz seeks decisive battles, focusing on the enemy, which can hasten war termination. Writing about the purpose and means of war, he stresses, "Of all the possible aims in war, the destruction of the enemy's armed forces always appears the highest" (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 99). Taking a deeper look at the impact of prolonged war, Sun Tzu flatly asserts, "There has never been a protracted war from which a country has benefited" (Sun Tzu, 1963, p. 73). Sun Tzu also counsels, "When you surround an army, leave an outlet free ... do not press a desperate foe too hard," which has led some contemporary observers to draw parallels with the current Israel-Hamas conflict, arguing that it may have been a strategic error to corner Hamas in Gaza" (Israel, 2023). The significance of such observations comes to the fore when considering that opposing irregular forces often "seek to wage a protracted conflict" (Joes, 2006, p.

1). Heeding their calls to deliberately work towards limiting the duration of the war is one way to gain some advantages. Enlightened generalship is another.

Clausewitz highlights the potential impact of the military genius. The priority accorded to focused training, wide education, and deep reflection by modern militaries today, bears testimony to their recognition of the need to groom military leaders. If not a guarantee of producing the next Napoleon, a "God of War," (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 583) as Clausewitz terms his brilliant enemy commander, they provide opportunities for the enlightenment of the professional officer corps. Similarly, Sun Tzu advocates wisdom, sincerity, humanity, courage, and strictness as the qualities of a general in command, warning that, "those who master them win; those who do not are defeated" (Sun Tzu, 1963, p. 65). While technological and procedural developments may have enhanced efficiency, other factors, such as the ubiquitous media, have added further complexities to the modern battlefield. The pervasive friction on the battlefield could be partly mitigated by such a general, through experience and a refined ability to anticipate problems (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 121). His practiced intellect could also cut through some of the inevitable fog of war. Along with enlightened generalship, both Clausewitz and Sun Tzu also recognize the existence of an even less tangible, but vital factor on the battlefield—the question of will.

Clausewitz in particular, pays immense attention to the psychological factor in war, which is linked to the will to fight. Discussing it at length under 'military genius' he later dedicates a whole chapter to it, "since the moral elements are among the most important in war" (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 184). Sun Tzu (1963, p. 63) wants 'moral influence' to be the first factor of the estimate. Despite advancements in technology and the increasing impact of machines in combat, in the final analysis, war is still a very human endeavor. It follows, therefore, that the state of will in the human element remains an essential determinant of success in war and a constant factor of the nature of war. In an eerie resemblance with the current Russo-Ukraine War, a recently published minor

treatise from Clausewitz on the Russo-Turkish War or 1736-39 over the Crimean region, focusing on the sheer scale of destruction, concludes that, such devastating measures on the part of the Russians (then led by Empress Anna) were essentially "preventative... namely as a means of distracting and hindering the [Crimeans and their Turkish allies] so they could not take more decisive military action" (Burns, 2023). Arguably, as technology ushers in further automation, robotics, and even artificial intelligence, the tendency to neglect such human and psychological factors may creep in. Clausewitz and Sun Tzu would both concur that such neglect would be at our peril. In other areas, however, Clausewitz and Sun Tzu differ, and we have to be more selective in determining which of their divergent concepts are more applicable today.

Clausewitz believes in violence as a fundamental aspect of war, while Sun Tzu thinks of war in a wider sense. For Clausewitz, it is a fallacy to believe that the art of war is to find "some ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed" (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 75). Having personally lived through the tumultuous events unleashed by the deft handling of the Grande Armée by Napoleon, intent on decisively bringing its superior mass to bear upon the enemy, he proclaims that everything depends upon "the decision by force of arms" (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 99). The Sri Lankan government's eventual strategy to militarily defeat the Tamil Tigers could arguably be taken as an example of this approach. Meanwhile, Sun Tzu, drawing upon Eastern philosophy and mindset, espouses, "those skilled in war subdue the enemy's army without battle" (Sun Tzu, 1963, p. 79). He posits that war should be visualized and prosecuted beyond the decisive battle. In that sense, Sun Tzu offers a more useful mindset for the integration of all elements of national power. Arguably, he also presents a better conceptual framework for the integration of soft power, which Nye postulates stems from a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies (Nye, 2006). As with the idea of the centrality of violence, faith in intelligence is another area of divergence between Clausewitz and Sun Tzu.

Clausewitz does not consider intelligence as a dependable factor in war, while many of Sun Tzu's concepts appear to be based upon a strong assumption of reliable intelligence. Clausewitz prefers to rely upon other factors, such as the genius in commanders, to mitigate the lack of reliable intelligence. He states, "Many intelligence reports in war are contradictory; even more are false, and most are uncertain" (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 117). Intelligence is certainly desirable to have, but cannot be adequately counted upon to confidently plan. Sun Tzu, on the other hand, perhaps based on the machinations of the feudal Chinese society of the time, "is known as the advocate of deception, surprise, intelligence, and maneuver to win without fighting" (Bartholomeus, 2012, p. 21). He dedicates an entire chapter to the employment of secret agents (Sun Tzu, 1963, p. 144-149). Many of his lessons seem to count on reliable intelligence, declaring for instance, "Determine the enemy's plans and you will know which strategy will be successful" (Sun Tzu, 1963, p. 100). It can be argued that the post-Gulf War euphoria within the U.S. Armed Forces was very 'Sun Tzu,' about the apparent faith in the availability and reliability of surveillance and intelligence on the modern battlefield. Yet, as subsequently demonstrated by the impact of the misguided decision to disband the Iraqi military in 2003; the difficulties in tracking Osama Bin Laden for nearly a decade; or, closer to home, the challenges of finding and fixing the then-rebel leadership in Nepal's conflict; Clausewitz's approach appears more practical. He is clearer about deliberately seeking to mitigate unavoidable gaps in intelligence. Compared to Clausewitz, Sun Tzu also seems to have greater confidence in the ability to project victory.

Clausewitz, as evidenced by his paradoxical trinity, which he likens to an "object suspended between three magnets," representing passion, reason, and chance, (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 89) is acutely conscious about the factors that make for unpredictability in war. He further suggests that "in war, the result is never final" (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 80). Indeed, even the ideal, of 'absolute war' is a utopian condition

that he recognizes is unlikely to be achieved, leaving a lesser 'real war' to be fought (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 579-581). Sun Tzu on the other hand, advocates certain steps that a commander can take, for success to inevitably follow. For instance, he declares, "he whose ranks are united in purpose will be victorious" (Sun Tzu, 1963, p. 144-149). Elsewhere, he announces, "If a general who heeds my strategy is employed, he is certain to win." Such absolutes appear counterintuitive to contemporary military professionals, who in their lifetimes, have witnessed major powers fail, or at least falter, against materially inferior forces. The Soviets in Afghanistan, who were compelled to ingloriously withdraw after some nine years of struggle against a relatively poorly equipped, but extremely resilient Mujahedin force, are a case in point. As was, more recently, the ignominious withdrawal of the Coalition from the same soil. Hence, the teachings of Clausewitz, who sees war as "more than a true chameleon" resonate more powerfully today (Clausewitz, 1976, p. 89).

Hence, the perpetual relevance and enduring academic utility of the theories postulated by Clausewitz and Sun Tzu endure within the contemporary sphere of military thought and practice. Together, they teach us about the interrelationship of policy and war; caution us against prolonged war; recognize the need for enlightened generalship; and accord due emphasis to the psychological dimension of war. Separately, Sun Tzu seems to better conceptualize war beyond violence, while Clausewitz appears more pragmatic in his cautious approach regarding the reliability of intelligence and the predictability of war. As long as humankind remains compelled to resort to war, the theories of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu will remain essential studies for military professionals, including Staff College students, in the ongoing pursuit of strategic wisdom.

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