

By Leila Ouardani

In 2001 a journalist covering the Afghanistan war discovered a copy of an Everyman edition of Carl Von Clausewitz's *On War* inside an al-Qaeda safe-house. In more ways than one this incident stands as a stark reminder of the complexity underlying the question of Clausewitz's contemporary relevance and provides a convenient conduit for further analysis. Following the end of the Cold War in 1990 and since the 11 September, 2001 attacks on the United States, Clausewitz's relevancy has been challenged by several prominent scholars, most notably John Keegan, Martin Van Creveld and Mary Kaldor. Unlike the condemnation inflicted earlier in the twentieth century, for instance by Basil Liddell Hart most famously through his description of Clausewitz as the 'Mahdi of the mass'— at the core of these more recent criticisms is the belief that the essential character of war, as described by Clausewitz, is no longer valid.

It is not within the scope of article to discuss aspects of Clausewitz's work that can now quite comfortably be labelled pragmatically obsolete; for instance it is unlikely that our al-Qaeda reader found Clausewitz's discussion on siege-warfare particularly relevant. Moreover, Clausewitz's indifference to economics, technology and naval matters is already well-known and discussed, and as Strachan rightly observes 'picking holes in *On War* is an easy game'. And yet the comprehensiveness of Clausewitz's writing on issues pertaining to war means that his work lends itself to continuous re-discovery at least more than many other theorists and therefore cannot be sufficiently dealt within its totality here—notably our al-Qaeda reader bypassed the most consulted parts of *On War* and bookmarked the section dealing with 'courage'. It is in consideration of all above that the analysis that follows concentrates upon what many consider the most threatening of challenges to Clausewitz's relevance: the nature of war, the ongoing 'long war' against Jihadist terrorism and the rise in asymmetric warfare. This article seeks to demonstrate that not only are these areas more susceptible to Clausewitzian analysis than critics have acknowledged but that his work provides insight that can further our understanding of these issues.

A handful of scholars have, through close and careful consultation of Clausewitz's original texts, responded to criticisms that Clausewitz's work has become invalid since the emergence of the 'war on terror'. Notably earlier attempts to counter this challenge tended not to call upon Clausewitz's writing to defend points; somewhat typical was Colin Gray's unitary retort that 'all wars are things of the same nature'. Clausewitz identified that the task of a theory of armed conflict, and as such the purpose of *On War*, was 'to examine the main elements that comprised war, to make more distinct what at first glance seems merged, to describe in detail the unique characteristics of war's means, to demonstrate their probable effects and to determine clearly the nature of war's purposes'. He noted however that war possesses both subjective and objective natures making it 'more than a simple chameleon' that only changes its colour as its environment changes. While a chameleon is considered to be able to change its colour but not its internal composition, by contrast, war's internal or objective tendencies according to

Clausewitz can vary in intensity and proportion even as its means of war change. Therefore the elements of war can change to such an extent that we could consider this variance a change in kind. Indeed our understanding of terrorism influences how we approach this conflict in general.

Clausewitz identified two types of conflict: one aimed at the total defeat of an opponent and one that intended to bring him to the negotiating table. Each type, however, was considered to possess infinite gradations; the basic nature of each could in essence be fundamentally different from one another because of the difference in their purposes. The physical and psychological methods used and ultimately the use of violence would be measured against the enemy's will and military capabilities. In Book 8 of *On War* Clausewitz provides planning considerations for those times where negotiated settlement is sought and those where complete defeat of the enemy is the primary goal. Clausewitz did not consider war a thing in itself, but rather an extension of policy, which would in itself establish war's purpose and subsequently determine what kind of war it would be. It must be noted that the difference between the use of the term 'policy' and 'politics' has caused much controversy, but in recent times scholars have highlighted that the German word used by Clausewitz, *politik*, can mean both. It can be noted, however, that Clausewitz defined policy as the "representative" or "trustee" of the individual interests of the "whole community", and considered it essentially an outcome of political activity. It follows that non-state actors, like states, arrive at policy decisions in similar ways, even if their methods differ substantially.

Antulio J. Echevarria asserts that Clausewitz's wondrous trinity, which is located at the core of the Clausewitzian nature of war, provides a useful framework for understanding the nature of the 'war on terror'. Van Creveld's attempt to propose a non-trinitarian approach to modern day warfare has been cast aside through closer attention to the Clausewitz's original wording. Clausewitz's trinity consists of three objective forces: a subordinating or guiding influence, the play of chance and probability, and the force of basic hostility (more simply referred to as: purpose, chance and hostility) and not, as Van Creveld calls it the government, people and military. Clausewitz considered these institutions themselves little more than the subjective representations of these general tendencies. Indeed Echevarria considers Clausewitz's use of the term 'trinity' to be an intentional decision since it conveys the sense that parts of war are independent in their own right but simultaneously belong to an indivisible whole. Appreciation of Clausewitz's historical context proves invaluable here; his trinity can be likened to the Christian mystery of three-spirits-in-one that would have been instantly recognisable to his Protestant and Catholic contemporaries.

It would follow therefore that globalisation (particularly instant global communication) can be seen to bring Clausewitz's elements of purpose, hostility and chance closer together, making the impact of their interaction less predictable, more volatile and less distinguishable from each other. For instance, as the impact of the Abu Ghraib images have demonstrated, in a globalised world seemingly independent (perhaps we could use the term tactical here) and local events can instantly influence strategic considerations. While this may not impact the basic underlying effort of one group attempting to impose its will on one another, it is likely to influence the tactics these groups will use. As such, the stated differences between the objective and subjective in the nature of war given by Clausewitz are clearly relevant here. In the case of the 'war on terror' both the state and non-state actors seek the political destruction of the other.

The emergence of 'small wars' has also been deemed to provide considerable challenge to Clausewitz's continued relevance. Van Creveld in particular emphasised that the epoch of inter-state wars had come to a definite end and that it had been replaced by low-intensity conflict. From a similar position Von Trotha asserted that the current wars in Black Africa pointed to Europe's future rather than its past. Mary Kaldor asserted that Clausewitz's treatment of conflict represented 'old war' and that these differed to the 'new wars' where sub-state actors constitute the major force. It is of course worthy of note that historians of European history prior to 1648 would immediately draw attention to the fact that these 'new wars', or rather conflicts, are in many ways not new phenomena. Indeed non-state actors of numerous varieties, for instance, war lords and brigandage, as well as the intimate connections between war and crime had an enduring feature prior to the peace of Westphalia. Nonetheless defenders of Clausewitz have called upon some of his more arcane manuscripts (many of which have not been translated and remain in German) to demonstrate that this form of warfare in fact effectively emphasises Clausewitz's contemporary relevance.

A number of scholars propose that Clausewitz provides a sophisticated structure to apply our understanding of unconventional warfare, more specifically the dialectic of both offence and defence in view to explain why big states frequently lose small wars. Indeed for Daase the usefulness of Clausewitz's work derives from the fact that, unlike contemporary approaches, he is not restricted by paradigmatic thinking. Through his observational powers and philosophical-logical-dialectical method a balanced, multi-faceted and realistic assessment of guerrilla warfare can be seen. Clausewitz's ideas regarding small wars developed in stages whereby he placed differing emphases on aspects of guerrilla warfare according to the national context. His 'Lectures on Small War' that he gave at the Berliner Kriegsschule in 1811-12 analysed guerrilla warfare through the lens of the Vendee rebellion 1793-96, the 1809 Tyrolean uprising and the Spanish insurrection of 1808. An essentially traditional 18th century perception of 'small war' of limited operations and small and light detachments was contemplated here. These lectures provide examples whereby states apply small-scale organised violence against military targets to exhaust the enemy and compel him to change his policy. In this case these 'small wars' are not considered distinct from 'big wars' and whilst Clausewitz acknowledges the defensive strength of small wars, he does not at this point consider them decisive for victory.

Later in *Bekenntnisschrift*, his memorandum of 1812, he promoted 'a Spanish civil war in Germany' through adopting the concept of national insurrection and encouraging guerrilla warfare strategy against Napoleonic France. In the context of the overwhelming military strength of his opponents, he considered 'small wars' to be now revolutionary. The key ingredient in this instance is the nation (the people) as opposed to the state (represented here by a hesitant king and reactionary bureaucracy). In this definition of a 'small war' application of both organised and un-organised violence by non-state actors against the military to exhaust the enemy's army to induce a change in policy can be identified. Indeed this conceptual device can adequately be used to describe recent forms of political violence, including terrorism. However by the time of Clausewitz's concise chapter on 'The People in Arms' in Book VI of *On War* he reverts to a more conservative approach, attempting to re-integrate the theory of guerrilla warfare into his general defence theory (scholars presume this was borne from his desire to consolidate the power of his recently liberated nation).

Clausewitz's offers critical insights into the dynamics of armed conflict through his conception of the dialectics of both defence and offence in unconventional warfare. He determines three levels of defence: tactical, strategic, and political defence. For Clausewitz, political defence refers to a situation whereby a nation struggles for its liberation or existence as opposed to attempting expand or extend itself. Strategic defence is the protection of national territory and not the defence of foreign land. While tactical defence involves awaiting the enemy rather than taking the initiative to strike first. It is of note here that tactical defence is not inevitably implied with strategic defence. 'Active defence' in the context of guerrilla warfare upholds its goal as to not crush the enemy's army but to exhaust it into submission: 'The enemy corps will have to overcome a situation of the most difficult defence and will daily lose power in this most unhappy of wars.' In symmetrical conflicts the strategic aim is the abolition of the enemy by way of destruction of his army rendering the tactical means ultimately decisive, however due to the non-state actors' relative military weakness small-scale attacks will be carried out strategically in the defence, while tactically in the offence. Indeed this was Clausewitz's proposition for the small war of national liberation of Prussia from the French Napoleonic forces in 1812. Allied to this, Clausewitz regarded the issue of motivation as critical in military victory. He considered an actor's power to consist of two elements: the means (soldiers, weapons and so on) and the strength of his will ('the intensity of the motive'). It was the advent of nationalism during the French Revolution that signalled the significance of the strength of will through the *levée en masse*—demonstrating that nationalist enthusiasm could be used defensively as well as offensively.

To conclude, in relation to contemporary international terrorism Clausewitz's nature of war should encourage theorists today to distinguish between what is new and what is only perceived to be new. Indeed in the midst of experiencing what appears to be a 'new war' it is more than easy to interpret change when in fact there is continuity. Clausewitz's framework essentially reminds us of the need to identify the purpose of actor's actions, and in the case of terrorism this emulation of approach has been generally lacking in analyses. Moreover, while Clausewitz did not elaborate his ideas on 'small wars' to the extent to which he had done so with conventional conflicts, his ideas collectively in this area provide a structure for further examination.