Timeless Theories of War in the 21st Century

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"War is a matter of vital importance to the State; the province of life or death; the road to survival or ruin. It is mandatory that it be thoroughly studied."

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

Warfare must be thoroughly studied. That was as true in the day of Sun Tzu as it is today. Thorough study leads to understanding the nature of war and with that understanding comes the ability to fight a war efficiently and effectively (or sometimes to not have to fight one at all). This will lead to the survival of the nation. Many say that the world is experiencing new threats and new forms of warfare. Fourth Generation Warfare, Unconventional Warfare, Insurgency/Counter Insurgency, Terrorism, and Asymmetric Warfare are some of the terminology being used to describe conflict and war in the 21st Century. To many theorists they describe the way of the future of warfare and the threats and conditions for which the United States military must prepare. Two logical questions arise from thinking about these terms. First, are these conditions and threats really new and different? Second, what do strategists need to know to be able to operate in these supposedly new conditions?

This paper argues that the nature of war has not significantly changed with the arrival the 21st Century. True, there appear to be new tactics, techniques, and procedures as evidenced by the tragedy of 9-11. The likelihood of direct nation-state to nation-state conflict seems to be declining with the rise of non-state actors such as transnational terrorists and due somewhat to the massive firepower and destructive capabilities
available to state supported military forces. However, regardless of the threat and its tactics there remains a fundamental foundation of conflict and this is an enduring immutable truth: “War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.”

This applies across the spectrum of conflict from the lowest intensity levels through terrorism and insurgency to large scale conventional war. Clausewitz understood this fundamental principle and this maxim is as true today as it was in the 19th Century.

Furthermore, this paper will not focus on the traditional principles of war as outlined in U.S. joint doctrine. While still relevant in many situations of conventional war and at the tactical and operational level, they are not as useful for leaders today as are the theories set down by the two true great masters of war: Sun Tzu and Clausewitz. In fact, the fundamental thesis of this paper is that the solution to any political-military problem can be found by studying the works of the great masters. Warfare today, as in the centuries past, is a complex form of human interaction that is nearly unpredictable in that there are myriad of factors that can affect the outcome. Because of this there is no prescription that can be followed that will ensure a successful outcome. Simply applying the traditional principles of war, or combinations thereof to every situation is not useful. What is required for successful military operations are leaders that possess coup d’oeil which Clausewitz defined as the “inward eye” and described the concept simply as the “quick recognition of a truth that the mind would ordinarily miss or would perceive only after long study and reflection.”

Strategists, whether political or military, must strive to attain this core attribute and the only way it can be attained is through thorough study of the nature of war and the theories of the great masters and with experience. With that foundation, leaders can develop and execute effective strategies to ensure the survival of
the nation. Following a brief discussion of the apparent conditions of war in the 21st Century, this paper will examine five enduring principles or concepts from Clausewitz and Sun Tzu and demonstrate that they remain timeless and relevant in the 21st Century. These principles form the basis for the development of strategy regardless of the type of conflict that a nation faces. These concepts themselves provide no answers. It is only through intensive and critical study that they can become ingrained into the strategist’s analytical framework so that complex political-military problems can be solved. Again, these principles provide no answers in and of themselves. The solutions are found through study and the development of Clausewitz’ coup d’oie. *Who thinks wins?*

**Present and Future Found in the Roots**

Today, theorists such as COL Thomas X. Hammes and William Lind describe the apparently new way of war in terms of 4th Generation Warfare. Lind and four Marine and Army officers coined the term 4th Generation Warfare in 1989 in an article in the Marine Corps Gazette in which they defined this most succinctly as *idea based warfare.* COL Hammes has updated the theory and described it in terms of current operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and applies it to potential future conflicts around the world in his book, *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century.* The underlying premise is that the U.S. military is facing new and complex threats posed by the natural evolution of the nature of war. While many characterize this “new” form of war as heavy on psychological or information warfare they also describe it in terms of a David and Goliath conflict in which a weaker combatant can use unconventional or asymmetric means to defeat a technologically and numerically superior adversary. Another way to
look at this form of warfare is simply that in the 4th Generation the weak adversary does not fight fair and does not conform to the traditional rules of warfare; e.g., the principles of war. According to Lind and Hammes today’s warfare is networked, relies heavily on the indirect approach, is a highly evolved form of insurgency, and most important, is focused on influencing the enemy’s will. Influencing will is the essence of today’s warfare. But is it really new?

Hammes rightly credits the birth of 4th Generation Warfare with Mao Tse-tung and his “People’s War.” He also notes that Giap and Ho took it to the next level with their version of the People’s War in Vietnam. Douglas Pike, in his seminal work on the Vietnam War details the Vietnamese strategy of Dau Tranh (the “Struggle”) emphasizing that the strategy was beyond a purely military strategy but one which mobilized the entire population – a political struggle with the three now famous action programs (or “vans”): action among the enemy; action among the people, and action among the military. This was a comprehensive political-military strategy that had as a key element the psychological influence of its own people, its military, and that of the enemy. But the focus was not just on the enemy’s military force; it struck right at the heart of the enemy: the will of the enemy government leadership and its population.

Lind and Hammes have accurately illustrated the current form of conflict in the 21st Century. However, they never make the claim that this is something totally new and different. The problem is that 4th Generation Warfare and the other terms mentioned above are now in vogue and serve as the underpinnings for military transformation. What is even most interesting is that while many embrace the concepts of Sun Tzu due to his emphasis on the indirect approach and the psychological aspect of warfare, many of
today’s 4th Generation proponents see little value in Clausewitz because they believe that
his theory of war rested on focusing on the destruction of the enemy’s Army, thus the
direct attack and attrition warfare seem to be the “Clausewitzian principles” many of
today’s strategists want to debunk.

The most significant example of the move away from Clausewitz as the
conventional war proponent to the 4th Generation Warfare camp can be seen in the
current discussions in the Pentagon during the development of the guidance for the
upcoming Quadrennial Defense Review. Guidance is being written that will shift the
focus of military operations away from conventional war and toward the current strategic
problem set that faces the military forces of the 21st Century: counter-insurgency;
terrorism, nation building and the like.10 While this is an important shift in thinking by
the Pentagon the only thing that is new is the Pentagon’s focus on this aspect of war.
Furthermore the entire spectrum of war has existed since Sun Tzu’s time and will
continue to exist.

The current strategic problem is that the emphasis has been on high intensity
conventional maneuver warfare and not the other complex political-military problems
that are being confronted in the Global War on Terrorism and in operations in
Afghanistan, Iraq, the Philippines, the Horn of Africa and other lesser known conflicts
around the world. Strategy cannot be developed using only a single type of threat.
Unfortunately that is how the U.S. has built its military and constructed its strategies.
With the pendulum shifting to the lower intensity spectrum the U.S. may make the same
mistake again if it develops capabilities with a single focus in mind. Military capabilities
must be flexible and agile to deal with the entire spectrum because the nature of conflict
is not static. To borrow a timeworn phrase, the only constant in warfare is change. The question then becomes, how do militaries prepare to deal with an ever evolving threat? The remainder of this paper will use key theories of Clausewitz to provide the fundamental understanding of the nature of war and conflict and then use central concepts of Sun Tzu as the foundation for the development of strategies to operate in the 21st Century environment.

**Politics and Policy**

What Clausewitz understood in the 19th Century is that all warfare has a political dimension. It is not solely about the force on force military confrontation. There must be an end state to be achieved in any conflict for there to be a successful outcome for one side. This end state has to be more than the destruction of the opposing military force because war is a continuation of policy by other means.11 It is the political object that must be understood and embraced. The key is to understand the political object and “the influence it can exert upon the forces it is meant to move.”12 The critical word in this construct is *influence*; every action, whether political or military must be executed with the understanding that it will influence someone, some population, some military force, or some government. This is the moral domain of war. Napoleon said it best: the moral is to the physical as three is to one. In today’s networked, information age environment where every action has the potential for a strategic effect, Napoleon’s dictum needs to be modified to highlight the fundamental importance of political considerations: In the 21st Century the political is to the military as ten is to one.
**War as a True Chameleon**

Clausewitz said war is more than a true chameleon; it is actually a paradoxical trinity that, in short, is made up of primordial violence, chance, and reason with these three variables constantly in tension with each other.\(^{13}\) This trinity can be found in any example of state to state and non-state actor to state conflict both today and throughout history. In order to develop a strategy for dealing with the complex political-military problems in the 21\(^{st}\) Century, the trinity must be understood and applied to analyze the conditions as they currently exist. Thorough study and analysis will also reveal what the correct balance should be in order to achieve the desired end state.

**Know thy Enemy, Know thy Self**

Sun Tzu was the master of understating the obvious. “Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril.”\(^{14}\) This deceptively simple statement is actually very complex and critical to developing strategies that will attain the political object. Although many tacticians take this statement to mean that one should understand the enemy’s strength and dispositions as well as ones own. However, strategists must go must deeper than that. They must delve into the culture of the opposition as well as understanding their own cultural biases and political conflicts. Again, the obvious here is that this act of gaining knowledge is the province of intelligence. However, it cannot be solely the province of intelligence personnel. The strategist must be able to synthesize the full range of information about the adversaries and his own forces. Most important is the ability to understand how adversaries are influenced and knowing how to minimize the influence of the enemy on the strategist’s
own forces, civilian leadership, and general population. Since warfare is “idea based” relying on psychological or information warfare, it is an absolute imperative to know the enemy and know yourself so that strategies can be developed that achieve the political object established at the outset. If the strategist knows the enemy he will be able to discern the enemy’s strategy and therefore has achieved the first step toward victory in that he now has the foundation to develop ways and means to attack the strategy.

**Attack Strategy Not Forces**

Sun Tzu said the acme of skill is to win without fighting.\(^{15}\) This is certainly the ideal that strategists must strive to achieve. However, since “the enemy has a vote” it may be impossible to avoid a fight. Regardless of whether a fight occurs, the solution to any complex political-military situation lies in identifying the enemy’s strategy and then attacking it. “Thus what is of supreme importance is to attack the enemy’s strategy.”\(^{16}\) Again, this is a deceptively simple statement but a complex concept to execute. Most strategists envision operations being executed on the physical battlefield. What is lost on most is that the real fight takes place on the “battlefield of human terrain.” Warfare today is more idea based than ever before and often the key to success or failure lies in the will of the people.

One of the main reasons the U.S. was defeated in the Vietnam War because the American people lost the will to continue to fight. The successful execution of Dau Tranh, or the “struggle”, led to the famous exchange between the late Colonel Harry Summers and North Vietnamese Colonel Tu:
“You know you never defeated us on the battlefield” said the American Colonel. To which the North Vietnamese Colonel replied, “That may be so, but it is also irrelevant.”

The North Vietnamese, either by design or by happen stance, were able to very effectively attack the will of the American people. Ironically, the most effective attack of American will was through the stunning defeat of their forces in 1968 during the Tet Offensive. This event triggered the unraveling of American foreign and military policy in Southeast Asia and had a profound effect on the American political system to include the withdrawal of an incumbent President from seeking a second full term. While the U.S. military continued to be victorious on the battlefield it was losing on the battlefield of human terrain. Had U.S. strategists understood the nature of the Dau Tranh strategy they could have taken steps to both attack it and defend the American population from its effective employment.

A form of the same strategy of “struggle” is likely being employed today in the Global War on Terrorism and by the insurgents in Iraq. While the focus is on the physical targets that are being struck by terrorists and insurgents, what is missing is the understanding by U.S. strategists that the targets are not physical but intellectual, ideological, and emotional. The tragic bombing of the mess tent in Mosul had the potential to significantly erode the already tenuous support for Operation Iraqi Freedom within the American population.

This discussion naturally leads to the question of how can such a strategy be attacked? One of the simplest ways is to understand and expose the strategy for what it is. While many people complain that the press is focused on reporting the bad and sensationalizing the actions of the terrorists and insurgents, thus seemingly aiding their
cause, what is really happening is that the U.S. is ceding the initiative on the war of ideas to the enemy. The press is always going to focus on the highly visible actions of the insurgents. It is what draws viewing audiences and readers. This fact must be understood and accepted. However, what must be done to is to go public exposing the enemy’s strategy not only to the American public and international community but also to the civilian population in the conflict area. Ultimately it is the local population that will win or lose and if they are armed with the knowledge of the enemy’s strategy they have the basic ability to defend themselves in this war of ideas.

If Douglas Pike had written his book during the Vietnam War as part of the operational estimate and area assessment as opposed to a history after the fact, U.S. strategists might have been able to discern the strategy of Dau Tranh and develop ways to counter it and seize the initiative from the North Vietnamese. U.S. strategists have the opportunity to learn from the mistakes of Vietnam and prevent a similar outcome if they will truly learn the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy, the local population, the international community and the American people and develop ways and means to attack the insurgent’s strategy.

**Conclusion**

Warfare today is not radically different in the 20th Century. Although there are vast technological changes, the nature of war remains fundamentally about influencing people and organizations thus making it a complex political and military problem; not solely a correlation of military force construct. It is a test of wills; an act of forcing one’s will on another. Regardless of the type of conflict, from large scale conventional war to
insurgency and revolutionary war, this concept holds true. Clausewitz’ trinity is the basis for understanding the relationships among the participants. Furthermore, war has always had a political dimension; however with rise of the information age; the political aspect is more important than ever particularly when the nature of the conflict involves counter-insurgency and nation-building.

Thorough study of Clausewitz provides insight into the nature of war and allows the strategist to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the problem in order to develop strategies that will satisfy the political objective. To develop effective plans the strategist must follow Sun Tzu’s direction to know the enemy and know himself. However, the most vital principle of all is the proposition that what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy’s strategy.

No matter how the nature of conflict and war is described today, the fundamental truth is that war continues to be an act to force one’s will on the enemy. Conflict remains a war of ideas. Despite the rapid technological advances and the proliferation of advanced weapons and information systems, warfare, as it always has, still takes place on the battlefield of human terrain. There is no simple list of principles that provides a prescription for success. Successful strategies can only be developed by thorough study and understanding of the nature of each unique conflict. Strategists must strive to attain Clausewitz’ coup d’oiel. This can be done through the study and application of the timeless principles of the great masters. However, solutions to complex political-military problems cannot be found in the works of the great masters, but the study of them will lead to the release of the ideas from strategists and the design of concepts that will
become successful strategies. Sun Tzu and Clausewitz remain completely relevant in the 21st Century. Their theories are timeless.

Colonel David S. Maxwell, U.S. Army, is a Special Forces officer with command and staff assignments in Korea, Japan, Germany, the Philippines, and CONUS, and is a graduate of the School of Advanced Military Studies at Fort Leavenworth and the National War College, National Defense University. The opinions he expresses in this paper are his own and represent no U.S. Government or Department of Defense positions.

3 Joint Pub 3-0, Joint Operations, 9 SEP 2000. Appendix A lists the 9 principles of war: objective, offensive, mass, economy of force, maneuver, unity of command, security, surprise, simplicity.
4 Clausewitz, p. 102.
5 “Who Thinks Wins” is from GEN Wayne A. Downing’s command briefing when he was the Commander of the United States Special Operations Command. This is adapted from the British Special Air Service motto: “Who Dares Wins.”
7 COL Thomas X. Hammes, The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century, (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2004), p. 2 and 208. Probably the best source of information on 4th Generation Warfare theory can be found on the Defense and National Interest Web Site at http://www.d-n-i.net. This site has numerous briefings and papers on 4th Generation Warfare. Lind and Hammes as well as a number of other authors actually credit the late Air Force Colonel John Boyd with the development of this theory.
8 Ibid, p. 44 and 56.
11 Clausewitz, p. 87.
12 Ibid., p. 81.
13 Ibid., p. 89.
14 Sun Tzu, p. 84.
15 Ibid., p. 77.
Ibid., p. 77