Inconclusive Wars: Is Clausewitz Still Relevant in these Global Times?

Mary Kaldor

London School of Economics and Political Science

Research Article

Abstract

This article argues that the core Clausewitzean proposition that war tends to extremes no longer applies in contemporary wars. Instead an alternative proposition is put forward that war tends to be long lasting and inconclusive. The article adopts the Clausewitzean method and derives this proposition from the logic of a redefinition of war. It also shows the relevance of many of Clausewitz's central tenets if reinterpreted. Thus contemporary wars are about politics, not policy; they are instrumental and rational but not reasonable (in the sense of being in accordance with universal values); and they bring together a trinity of motivations (reason, chance and passion) but not a trinity of the state, the generals and the people since new wars are fought by a range of nonstate actors. In particular, international missions in crisis zones should take seriously what Clausewitz says about the importance of political control, the character of the commander and the crucial significance of moral forces.

Policy Implications

- The redefinition of war as organised violence framed in political terms that can be either a mutual enterprise or a contest of wills has profound implications for policy.
- If war is a mutual enterprise rather than a contest of wills, then the international policy must aim to damp down violence rather than support one side or another or even find a compromise between the sides.
- Policy instruments like international law, creating humanitarian space or involving civil society may be just as or more important than political negotiation.
- Morale and leadership are crucial in international missions to crisis zones.

On War is one of those great books, like religious texts or classic works of political theory, from which soldiers, statesmen and scholars gain inspiration and legitimation for what they are trying to achieve.[1] It is the standard text in all war colleges and officers are expected to relate their proposed strategies to some tenet of Clausewitz's thought. Yet Clausewitz was primarily concerned with the great armed clashes between states that were typical of European wars in the 19th and 20th centuries. So is Clausewitz still relevant in the 21st century? Or does our habitual deference to Clausewitz cloud our ability to deal with contemporary conflicts at a global level? Can Clausewitzean thinking be applied in an era when absolutist conceptions of the nation state are giving way to complex multilateral arrangements and when wars between nation states are being supplanted by new types of warfare involving nonstate actors?

In this article, I argue that the notion of absolute war, the inner tendency of war to lead to extremes, which I regard as the core of Clausewitzean theory, is no longer applicable. For Clausewitz, war was fundamentally about the 'urge to decision', which was achieved through fighting, that is to say combat between two warring parties, and this implied the need for speed and concentration; the suspension of belligerent action and the dispersal of forces did, of course, take place but were explained in terms of departures from the inner nature of war. Today's wars, by contrast to the European wars of the 19th and 20th centuries, are inconclusive, long lasting and have a tendency to spread. My argument is that this is because these wars have a different inner nature. In this sense, a Clausewitzean understanding of these wars can be deeply counterproductive in developing appropriate international strategies both for trying to end these wars and for the role of military forces. On the other hand, there is much in Clausewitz's method of argument that can help us think through alternative approaches.

The argument can be said to be post-Clausewitzean, in the literal sense of coming after Clausewitz. It builds on Clausewitz's methodological approach – the dialectic between the ideal and the real and the need to combine experience, empirical study and theory. And it accepts that certain important propositions made by Clausewitz, including the trinitarian conception of war as reason, chance and emotion; the primacy of policy or politics; and the instrumentalisation of war, remain highly relevant, depending on how they are interpreted. In particular, some of Clausewitz's

practical insights such as his ruminations on the nature of military genius, the concept of the centre of gravity or the emphasis on moral forces have considerable bearing on contemporary international military operations in crisis zones. But perhaps most importantly, the 'new wars' of the 21st century can only be defined in contrast to what went before and our understanding of what went before depends heavily on what we learn from reading *On War*.

The article begins with a discussion of absolute war and why the concept is no longer applicable. I then consider how the trinitarian conception of war, the role of reason and the primacy of politics helps our understanding of contemporary war. And, in the final section, I discuss the normative implications of a theory of 'new wars' and what we might or might not glean from reading Clausewitz for international operations in new war zones.

Beyond absolute war

There are two kinds of war in *On War*: absolute and real war. These are not empirical categories. Absolute war is an abstract idea, a Kantian ideal type; it is about the essence of war, its inner nature, and can be logically deduced from the definition of war. Real war refers to actual historical experience. It is in the dialectical tension between these two types of war that Clausewitz's theory of war resides.

In Book I, Chapter I of *On War*, which is the only chapter Clausewitz claimed to have finished, he sets out his definition of war. 'War', he says,

> is nothing but a duel on an extended scale. If we would conceive as a unit the countless number of duels which make up a war, we shall do so best by supposing to ourselves two wrestlers. Each strives by physical force to compel the other to submit to his will: each endeavours to throw his adversary, and thus render him incapable of further resistance. *War therefore is an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will* (Clausewitz, 1997, p. 5, emphasis in original).

Violence, he says, is the means. The ultimate object is the 'compulsory submission of the enemy to our will' and, in order to achieve this, the enemy must be disarmed.

He then goes on to explain why this must lead to the extreme use of violence.

> Now philanthropists may easily imagine there is a skilful method of disarming and overcoming an enemy without causing great bloodshed … However plausible this may appear, still it is an error, which must be extirpated; for in such dangerous things as war, the errors which proceed from a spirit of benevolence are the worst. As the use of physical power to the utmost extent by no means excludes the cooperation of intelligence, it follows that he who uses forces unsparingly, without reference to the bloodshed involved, must obtain a superiority if his adversary uses less vigour in its application. *The former then dictates the law to the latter, and both proceed to extremities to which the only limitations are those imposed by the amount of counteracting force on each side* (Clausewitz, 1997, p. 6, emphasis added).

In other words, the inner nature of war – absolute war – follows logically from the definition as each side is pushed to make fresh efforts to defeat the other – a proposition that Clausewitz elaborates in Chapter I through what he calls the three reciprocal actions according to which violence is 'pushed to its utmost bounds' (Clausewitz, 1997, p. 7).

Reality, however, as Clausewitz goes on to point out, is different. Real war differs from absolute war because of what Clausewitz calls 'friction' or sometimes a 'resistant' or 'non-conducting medium'. Friction can refer to political restraint or inadequate popular backing, which slows down war, or it can refer to what is often known as the fog of war – lack of intelligence, poor logistics, inadequate organisation, indiscipline, difficult terrain, bad luck and so on. But even though real wars differ from absolute wars and indeed from each other, they all contain the inner tendency for absolute war.

Recent interpretations of Clausewitz have tended to de-emphasise the tendency for absolute war and to draw attention to the famous Clauswitzean proposition that war is an instrument of policy or a continuation of policy/politics by other means. This is very much the thrust of the interpretations put forward by Peter Paret and Michael Howard in their introductions to their translation of *On War* published in 1976. They draw attention to a note by Clausewitz written in 1827 in which he says that war could be of two kinds: either to destroy the enemy so that the victor can dictate terms or to achieve more limited objectives so that peace can be negotiated, and that he was planning to rewrite the text of *On War* with this in mind (see Strachan, 2007a). Beatrice Heuser has suggested that there is a difference between the early Clausewitz notion of existential war and the later limited or instrumental view of war (Heuser, 2002). But Clausewitz did not actually rewrite the text drawing attention to these two types of war. This may have been his intention although a later note about his plans for revising the book, thought to have been written in 1830, a year before his death, does not refer to this distinction. Moreover, the later note states that Book I, Chapter I, is fully revised but that chapter, which probably encapsulates his theory of war, does not refer to these types of war either. In any case, it is the text as it exists that we have to treat as his thinking.

Even if we grant greater salience to this distinction between limited and unlimited war, it does not negate his theory of absolute war. It is an empirical rather than a

theoretical distinction. Clausewitz did not deny the existence of limited war or, indeed, of 'small wars' as they are now known. But the point that he is making about the inner tendency of war also applied to wars that were constrained by more limited aims, or which, in the case of small wars, were fought by peoples' militia. Some argue that Clausewitz extensively wrote about small wars and that this is very relevant to today's wars (Strachan, 2007b) but small wars, for Clausewitz, like limited wars, displayed the same inner tendencies.

A full reading of *On War* amply demonstrates this argument. For Clausewitz, combat and battle were the core components of war. And this is repeated over and over again throughout the book and in the plan of the book (theory, strategy, combat, military forces, defence, attack and plan of war). For Clausewitz, 'the destruction of the enemy's military force is the foundation stone of all action in war' (Book I, Chapter II), the 'supreme law … is the decision by arms' (Book I, Chapter II); war is 'fighting' (Book II, Chapter I); combat is the 'real activity in warfare' (Book IV, Chapter I); battle is the 'real centre of gravity of war' (Book IV, Chapter IX); battle is 'war concentrated, as the centre of effort of the whole war or campaign' (Book IV, Chapter IX). His descriptions of battle are particularly vivid:

> Here on this spot, in this very hour, to conquer the enemy is the purpose in which the plan of war with all its threads converges, in which distant hopes, all dim glimmerings of the future meet, fate steps in to give an answer to the bold question (Clausewitz, 1997, p. 237).

And in Book VIII, he repeats his definition of absolute war:

> [T]he overthrow of the enemy is the natural end of the act of war, and that if we would keep *within the strictly philosophical limits of the idea*, there can be no other in reality. As this idea must apply to both belligerent parties, it must follow that there can be no suspension in the military act, and peace cannot take place until one or other of the parties concerned is overthrown (Clausewitz, 1997, p. 333, emphasis added).

Clausewitz's notion of absolute war, I would argue, explains why he is so preoccupied with the suspension of the act of war and with defensive war. Indeed, a whole section of Book I, Chapter I is devoted to the problem of the suspension of war. The logic of absolute war suggests that war should be concentrated in a single blow – a point that he makes repeatedly.

> [A] suspension of the act of warfare, strictly speaking, is in contradiction with the nature of the thing: because two armies, being incompatible elements, should destroy one another unremittingly, just as fire and water can never put themselves in equilibrium, but act and react upon one another, until one quite disappears. What would be said of two wrestlers who remained clasped round each other for hours without making a movement?' (Clausewitz, 1997, p. 190)

Yet, he acknowledges, most wars involve waiting around; 'standing still' is the norm. Much of his explanation has to do with timidity and imperfection of human perception. He describes 18th-century wars as 'shrivelled-up' 'half-and-half' affairs; this is partly explained by the failure to mobilise national power, which only became possible after the French Revolution.

But perhaps his most interesting explanation for the suspension of attack derives from the inner nature of war and not from friction, as in the case of the above explanations. This explanation has to do with the asymmetry of war, which results from the difference between the defence and the offence. Book VI on the defence is enormously long, the longest book in *On War*. Clausewitz makes the argument that the defence is always stronger than the offence, a proposition that has almost become a truism nowadays, for both physical and moral reasons. In theory, a suspension of war can only take place because one side waits for 'a more favourable moment' but unless forces are exactly balanced, which they never are, then it would never be the case that both sides wait for a more favourable moment because it would always benefit one side to attack. However, the defender may prefer to wait for an attack while he builds up his forces, while an attacker may feel too weak to attack. In Book VI, Clausewitz sets out all the possible options for a defender – to attack at the borders, to retreat to the interior, as well as other possibilities and the pros and cons of different options. It is in Book VI that he sets out what might be described as a theory of attrition; that the defender holds out until the attacker is worn down by the attack and can no longer defend the territory he has gained or his lines of communication. He also describes the important role that a people's militia can play in the defence. But the central point of Book VI is that strategic defence cannot be won by defensive tactics alone. In the end, the defender also has to use offensive tactics and victory can only be achieved through combat. The war cannot be suspended indefinitely. 'A swift and vigorous assumption of the offensive – the flashing sword of vengeance – is the most brilliant point in the defensive' (Clausewitz, 1997, p. 286).

The proof of Clausewitz's theory was, for him, the Napoleonic Wars. Clausewitz was, of course, profoundly influenced by those wars, in which he himself took part, and the transformation of war that took place during his lifetime. By mobilising the population for war, Clausewitz

believed that Napoleon had shown how war could approach its absolute nature. Everywhere, he writes in Book VIII, war appears to be something quite different from its inner nature – 'a half-and-half production'.

> We might doubt whether our notion of its absolute character or nature was founded in reality if we had not seen real warfare make its appearance in this absolute completeness just in our own times. After a short introduction performed by the French Revolution, the impetuous Bonaparte quickly brought it to this point. Under him, it was carried out without slackening for a moment until the enemy was prostrated and the counter stroke followed with as little remission. Is it not natural that this phenomenon should lead us back to the original conception of war with all its rigorous deductions? (Clausewitz, 1997, p. 334)

In a chapter on the evolution of warfare and the different forms of warfare in each era, he concludes:

> The latest period of past time, in which war reached its absolute strength, contains most of what is of general application and necessary. But it is just as improbable that wars henceforth will all have this grand character as that the wide barriers which have been opened to them will ever be closed again (Clausewitz, 1997, p. 350).

In the century and a half that followed the publication of *On War* those 'wide barriers' remained open. Up until 1945, successive European wars retained this 'grand character' and took the form of mass slaughter on the battlefield. The attempt to overcome the will of the enemy where the enemy represented whole populations gave rise to a logic of annihilation expressed in Ludendorff's concept of 'totalitarian war', which was put into practice with the Holocaust and the development of atomic weapons.

My argument is that 'new wars' are the wars that come after the knowledge of those 'wide barriers'. After Hiroshima and Nagasaki came the realisation that war in Clausewitzean terms would lead, in Sakharov's words, to the 'self-destruction of civilisation' (quoted in Strachan, 2007b, p. 24). Different methods were developed to get around the unlimited character of war. Notions of deterrence allowed wars to be fought in the imagination but not in reality. New types of conflict were described as 'small', 'limited' or 'low intensity' even though they were anything but small, limited or of low intensity. The main point, however, is that war could no longer provide an instrument to defeat an enemy because that could only be done through annihilation. As Clausewitz himself pointed out, once war became a national undertaking, overcoming the enemy's will became even more challenging. 'Even the final decision of a whole war is not always to be regarded as absolute. The conquered state often sees in it a passing evil which may be repaired in after times' (quoted in Strachan, 2007b, p. 12).

Using armed force to defeat an enemy implies war without limits. And this argument applies not only to states but to all kinds of actors that engage in wars. Nuclear weapons could be treated as a metaphor for the technological developments that have been applied to killing. Even nonstate small groups can inflict mass destruction, as became apparent on September 11th, and it is very difficult for any side in war to gain a decisive advantage as coalition forces have discovered in Iraq and Afghanistan or as Israel discovered in Lebanon and Gaza. In other words, if military force is to be used to compel an opponent to fulfil our will, where that opponent is an armed force this can only be done through mass annihilation, which is likely to be mutual and therefore self-defeating.

But war, or the idea of war, still serves other functions. It can stimulate (or destroy) an economy. It can enrich particular interests. It can help to order (or disrupt) international relations. In particular, a key discovery of Clausewitzean war is the way it stimulates national feeling, something to which Clausewitz himself drew our attention.

I would thus reformulate the definition of war nowadays. War is 'an act of violence involving two or more organised groups framed in political terms'. According to the logic of this definition, war could either be a 'contest of wills' as is implied by Clausewitz's definition or it could be a 'mutual enterprise'. A contest of wills implies that the enemy must be crushed and therefore war tends to extremes. A mutual enterprise implies that both sides need the other in order to carry on the enterprise of war and therefore war tends to be long and inconclusive.

A mutual enterprise can be both political and economic though it has to be framed in political terms. War constructs an enemy in a way that serves the consolidation of political identity – a proposition I will develop in the next section. In new wars, the aim is not the overthrow of the enemy. New wars need enemies. The aim is to create a state of war in which particular groups benefit. In new wars, battles are rare and violence is mainly directed against civilians. Indeed, the key difference between 'new wars' and the wars described by Clausewitz is the avoidance of direct combat. Indeed the idea of combat as decision or battle as the centre of gravity is completely absent. Either combat is imaginary, as in the cold war, or military forces are used mainly against civilian forces, with occasional sporadic attacks on an opponent. Defeating the enemy is the justification, not the goal, of war. Through war and violence, the armed actors transform themselves from marginal extremists into mainstream power brokers. They turn themselves into protectors by generating the insecurity from which people need to be protected. Indeed the warring parties share a mutual need for justification and, consequently,

they may actually reinforce each other. Whether deliberate or not, the outcome is the creation of fear and hostility that can underpin polarising political ideologies and vested interests. Clausewitz himself describes how national hatred is not the same as personal hostility but 'hostile feeling is kindled by the act of combat itself' (Clausewitz, 1997, p. 88).

This interpretation can be applied to sectarian conflicts between, say, Serbs and Croats in the former Yugoslavia or Shia and Sunni in Iraq. The different parties are trying to carve out separate areas that they control politically rather than destroy each other. Indeed the existence of the other is necessary to justify their behaviour. The main aim is to frighten, kill or expel those who disagree or who have a different ethnicity or nationality. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, ordinary people understood the difference between 'Chetniks' (militant Serb nationalists) and Serbs or between Ushtashe (militant Croat nationalists) and Croats. In Baghdad, Sunni and Shiite groups did not actually attack each other. Sunni suicide bombers would enter a Shiite area and this would justify Shiite death squads who would kill ordinary civilians and take over Sunni parts of Baghdad.

Some of the mutual benefits may be economic. Contemporary conflicts are financed from a variety of means – loot, pillage, kidnapping, setting up checkpoints, criminal activities like drug smuggling or human trafficking, 'taxing' humanitarian assistance or mobilising remittances from the Diaspora. It is often not clear whether these activities are about financing the war or whether war provides a cover for carrying on these activities. Is the war in Afghanistan really a contest of wills between the Karzai government and the Taliban? Or are the warlords in the government colluding with the Taliban in a profitable mutual enterprise based on drugs?

The inner tendency of such wars is not war without limits but war without end. Wars, defined in this way, create shared self-perpetuating interest in war to reproduce political identity and to further economic interests. This is why we see the emergence of such terms as 'persistent conflict' (George Casey, US Army Chief of Staff), 'long war' (Rumsfeld), the 'forever war' (Dexter Filkins) or 'endless war' (David Keen). As Rupert Smith argues, in classic wars 'the premise is the sequence peace-crisis-peace, which will result in peace again, with the war, the military action, being the deciding factor. In contrast, the new paradigm … is based on the concept of a continuous criss-crossing between confrontation and conflicts' (Smith, 2005, p. 17).

These wars are reciprocal in terms of the ways that the existence of each side justifies the behaviour of the other. They are two-sided but the two sides collude as well as conflict. A Palestinian suicide attack on Israel legitimises an Israeli attack on Hamas and vice versa. But this reciprocal behaviour does not necessarily lead to a tendency for absolute war. What it does tend to do is to mobilise support for the warring parties on each side: for Hamas, for example, or the Israeli right. Violent actions do not involve the 'utmost exertion' and new wars strategy cannot lead to decisive endings. These are reciprocal actions based on what might be described as a kind of implicit collusion against the civilian population rather than deep hostility between each other. Even where, as in genocides or massive violations of human rights, violence is largely inflicted by one side against the civilian population, it is framed as a conflict in which violence is justified in terms of the existence of an enemy. The inner tendency of such conflicts is not for victory or defeat but for permanent inconclusive war that spreads across borders.

As in the Clausewitzean schema, real wars are likely to be different from the ideal description of war. The hostility that is kindled by war among the population may provoke disorganised violence or there may be real policy aims that can be achieved. There may be outside intervention aimed at suppressing the mutual enterprise. Or the wars may produce unexpectedly an animosity to violence among the population undermining the premises of political mobilisation on which such wars are based.

These wars are post-Clausewitzean in the sense that they come after Clausewitz, after the barriers opened up by Napoleon. The wars of the 18th century – the 'shrivelled-up' 'half-and-half' productions may have some similarities with contemporary wars but they are pre-Clausewitzean; they precede our knowledge of how far war can be taken. It may be that 18th-century commanders were fearful of the slaughter on the battlefield and were trying to avoid unlimited war, or even more likely that they were fearful of the consequences of involving the people, but the limits had never been reached and it was this that was exploited by Napoleon. Eighteenth-century wars were elite wars and since the French Revolution that is no longer possible. My argument is that in post-Clausewitzean wars, neither side has an interest in combat or in testing the limits; rather, war has a quite different logic. It is not to do with avoiding limits; there is nothing to be gained from approaching the limits.

In redefining war in this way, I am offering a different interpretation of war, a theory of war whose test is how well it offers a guide to practice. Since my definition of war is, as it were, an ideal type, I can use examples to support the theory but it is, in principle, unprovable. The question is whether it is useful. Take the example of the 'war on terror'. Antonio Echevarria defines the 'war on terror' in classic Clausewitzean terms: 'Both antagonists seek the political destruction of the other and, at this point, neither appears open to negotiated settlement' (Echevarria, 2007, p. 211). Understood in this way, each act of terrorism calls forth a military response, which in turn produces a more extreme counter-reaction. The problem is that there can be no decisive blow. The terrorists cannot be destroyed

by military means because they cannot be distinguished from the population. Nor can the terrorists destroy the military forces of the United States. But if we understand the 'war on terror' as a mutual enterprise, whatever the individual antagonists believe, in which the American administration shores up its image as the protector of the American people and the defender of democracy and those with a vested interest in a high military budget are rewarded, and in which extremist Islamists are able to substantiate the idea of a global jihad and to mobilise young Muslims behind the cause, then action and counter-reaction merely contribute to 'long war', which benefits both sides. Understood in Clausewitzean terms, the proposed course of action is total defeat of the terrorists by military means. Understood in post-Clausewitzean terms, the proposed course of action is very different; it has to do with both the application of law and the mobilisation of public opinion, not on one side or the other, but against the mutual enterprise.

The contrast between new and old wars, put forward here, is thus a contrast between ideal types of war rather than a contrast between actual historical experiences. Of course, the wars of the 20th century, at least in Europe, were close to the old war ideal and the wars of the 21st century are closer to my depiction of new wars. I am not sure that all contemporary wars actually conform to my description any more than earlier wars conformed to the old war description. Certainly Rousseau suggested that the wars of the 18th century had as much to do with domestic politics as with foreign policy since 'war furnishes a pretext for exactions of money and … for keeping large armies constantly on foot, to hold people at awe' (Hoffman and Fidler, 1991, pp. 90–91). Perhaps another way to describe the difference is between realist interpretations of war as conflicts between groups, usually states, that act on behalf of the group as a whole, and interpretations of war in which the behaviour of political leaders is viewed as the expression of a complex set of political and perhaps bureaucratic struggles, pursuing their particular interest or the interests of their faction or factions rather than the whole. It can be argued that in the Westphalian era of sovereign nation states, a realist interpretation had more relevance than it does today.

This conceptual distinction is not quite the same as the way I describe 'new wars' in earlier work, which referred to the involvement of nonstate actors, the role of identity politics, the blurring of the distinction between war (political violence) and crime (violence for private interests) as well as the fact that in new wars battles are rare and violence is mainly directed against civilians (Kaldor, 2007). But it is not inconsistent with that earlier description; it merely involves a higher level of abstraction. To elaborate this point, it is worth examining the other aspects of Clausewitzean thought, in particular the trinitarian conception of war and the role of policy or politics.

Reason, politics and the state

Most contemporary critiques of Clausewitz do not address the concept of absolute war. Rather they tend to focus on the role of the state and the instrumental character of war. Both John Keegan and Martin van Creveld have suggested that the trinitarian concept of war, with its tripartite distinction of the state, the army and the people, is no longer relevant (Keegan, 1993; Van Creveld, 1991). Other authors suggest that war is no longer an instrument of politics and, indeed, that the 'divorce of war from politics' is characteristic of both pre-Clausewitzean and post-Clausewitzean wars (Snow, quoted in Angstrom, 2003, p. 8). Along with these arguments, critics have also questioned the rationality of war. Van Creveld, for example, argues that it is 'preposterous … to think that just because some people wield power, they act like calculating machines that are unswayed by passions. In fact, they are no more rational than the rest of us' (quoted in Angstrom, 2003, p. 10).

Clausewitz introduces the 'wondrous' trinity in Book I, Chapter I, which suggests its importance to the whole theory of war although the actual term is hardly used in the rest of the work. The point of the concept, as I understand it, is to explain how a complex, social organisation, made up of many different individuals with many different motivations, can become, in his words, the 'personalised state' – a 'side' in or party to war.

> War is, therefore, not only chameleon-like in character, because it changes colour in some degree in each particular case, but it is, also, as a whole, in relation to the predominant tendencies which are in it, a wonderful trinity, composed of the original violence of its elements, hatred and animosity, which may be looked upon as blind instinct; the play of probabilities and chance, which make it a free activity of the soul; and of the subordinate nature of a political instrument, by which it belongs to pure reason (Clausewitz, 1997, p. 24).

These different 'tendencies' – reason, chance and emotion – are mainly associated with the state, the generals and the people, respectively, but the word 'mainly' or 'more' suggests that they are not exclusively associated with these different components or levels of warfare. In other words, the trinity is composed of tendencies or motivations rather than empirical categories.

In this depiction of the state, I am struck by the parallels with the Hegelian understanding of the modern state. Clausewitz was an exact contemporary of Hegel in Berlin and, indeed, they died in the same cholera epidemic. While he never directly acknowledged his debt to Hegel, he must have been aware of his lectures and writings.[2] Most scholars who argue that Clausewitz was influenced by Hegel usually

point to the dialectic between the ideal and the real but it can also be argued that Hegel's conception of the state helps to illuminate what Clausewitz meant by the trinity. Hegel has a similar tripartite interpretation of the modern state: the state, the family and civil society, each of which comprises a different realm of ethical life. Thus the family is the realm of love, passion and private interest. The state represents reason, based on universal values. And civil society is the arena (composed of the economy, the system of justice and welfare agencies) where different values and interests are reconciled. Civil society is the 'achievement of the modern world … the territory of mediation where there is free play for every idiosyncrasy, every talent, every accident of birth and fortune, and where waves of passion gush forth, regulated only by reason, glinting through them' (Hegel, quoted in Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999, p. 3).

In this schema, the state is the mediator on this 'territory of mediation'. Through the use of public reason, different values and interests are reconciled and universalised. I would argue that Clausewitz's concept of the trinity has to be interpreted in a similar way. Clausewitz puts considerable emphasis on the role of the cabinet in formulating policy and argues that the commander-in-chief should be a member of the cabinet. The cabinet, which in Clausewitz's time was a group of ministers advising the monarch, was thought to play a role in bringing together different interests and motivations and providing unifying publicly justifiable arguments for both war and the conduct of war. Of course, members of the cabinet had their own private motivations, as do generals (glory, enrichment, jealousy, etc.) but it is incumbent on them to come to some agreement, to provide the public face of the war and to direct the war and this has to be based on arguments that are universally acceptable (universal here referring to those who are citizens of the state). In his description of the evolution of warfare and the state, which again echoes Hegel's stadial theory of history, he argues that only in the modern period can the state be regarded as 'an intelligent being acting in accordance with simple logical rules' (Clausewitz, 1997, p. 342) and that this is associated with the rise of cabinet government where the 'cabinet had become a complete unity, acting for the state in all its external relations' (Clausewitz, 1997, p. 344).

Along with the importance of cabinet government, Clausewitz also emphasised the role of the people. The 'wide barriers' that had been opened up by Napoleon were not just about the technical know-how of war; they were about the involvement of the people. The French Revolution ushered in an era where all political struggles had to involve the mobilisation of the people; they depended on public opinion. This was one of the great discoveries of Clausewitzean war and it was a discovery that can never be undone.

Clausewitz argues that war is what unites the trinity. The trinity was 'wondrous' because it made possible the coming together of the people and the modern state. Here again there are strong parallels with Hegel's ideas. For Hegel, it is in war that individuality is reconciled with social solidarity. 'Sacrifice for the sake of the individuality of the state is the substantive relation of all the citizens, and, is thus, a universal duty … The content of bravery as a sentiment is found in the true and final end, the sovereignty of the state' (Hegel, 1996, pp. 334–335).

Indeed, Hegel argues that war is necessary for the 'ethical health of peoples' – otherwise they relapse into selfishness and corruption. Something similar is expressed by Clausewitz in a memorandum written in 1812, when he resigned his commission because of the accommodation made between France and Prussia: 'I believe and confess that a people can value nothing more highly than the dignity and liberty of its existence; that it must defend these to its last drop of blood' (quoted in Strachan, 2007b, p. 29). And his emphasis on moral forces in war also expresses the idea that war brings together disparate interests. Moral forces:

> form the spirit which permeates the whole being of war. These forces fasten themselves soonest and with the greatest affinity on to the will which puts in motion and guides the whole mass of powers, uniting with it as it were in one stream because this is a moral force itself (Clausewitz, 1997, p. 152).

In other words, Clausewitz argues that war constructs the nation through uniting the trinity, mobilising people behind a common cause based on reason. This is an argument put forward by Huw Strachan, who suggests that the synthesis of the trinity is war itself. 'The trinity of passion, probability and policy, or (if you must) of people, army and government, were united in war' (Strachan, 2007b, p. 44).

Is this version of Clausewitz's trinity relevant in 'new wars'? Obviously, and perhaps trivially, the distinction between the state, the military and the people is blurred in most new wars. New wars are fought by networks of state and nonstate actors and often it is difficult to distinguish between combatants and civilians. This is even true of US forces in Afghanistan and Iraq where large numbers of private contractors undertake a range of security-related tasks. It is also true of the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008, where regular forces appear to have been followed by gangs of irregulars and criminals who seem to have been responsible for much of the population expulsion and looting. So if we think of the trinity in terms of the institutions of the state, the army and people, then it cannot apply. But if we think of the trinity as a concept for explaining how disparate social and ethical tendencies are united in war, then it is clearly very relevant.

Along with the trinity, Clausewitz is remembered for his insistence of the primacy of politics. Clausewitz famously

makes the point that war is part of political intercourse, that it is not an interruption in politics but its continuation 'with a mixture of other means' (Clausewitz, 1997, p. 357). 'Is not war merely another kind of writing and language for political thoughts?' (Clausewitz, 1997, p. 358), he asks. 'In one word, the art of war, in its highest point of view is policy, but no doubt a policy which fights battles instead of writing notes' (Clausewitz, 1997, p. 360).

Among translators of Clausewitz there is a debate about whether the German word *politik* should be translated as policy or politics. I believe it applies to both if we roughly define policy as external, in terms of relations to other states, and politics as the domestic process of mediating different interests and views, or policy as what the state does and politics as what produces the state and shapes policy.

According to my definition, all wars are, of course, about violence framed in political terms. It is the political justification that makes killing in war different from murder. Suicide bombers regard themselves as soldiers, not criminals. Whatever may be their individual motivation, men (and sometimes women) fight for a political cause. This is what gives war legitimacy. New wars are also fought for political ends and, indeed, war itself can be viewed as a form of politics. The political narrative of the warring parties is what holds together dispersed loose networks of paramilitary groups, regular forces, criminals, mercenaries and fanatics, representing a wide array of tendencies – economic and/or criminal self-interest, love of adventure, personal or family vendettas or even just a fascination with violence. It is what provides a licence for these varying tendencies. Most new wars are about identity politics – that is to say, the claim to power in the name of a religious or ethnic identity. Moreover these identities are often constructed through war. Just as Clausewitz described how patriotism is kindled through war, so these identities are forged through fear and hatred, through the polarisation of us and them. In other words war itself is a form of political mobilisation, a way of bringing together, of fusing the disparate elements that are organised for war.

Understood in this way, war is an instrument of politics rather than policy. It is about domestic politics even if it is a politics that crosses borders rather than the external policy of states. If, for Clausewitz, the aim of war is external policy and political mobilisation the means, in new wars it is the other way round. Mobilisation around a political narrative is the aim of the war and external policy or policy *vis-à-vis* the proclaimed enemy is the justification.

So if new wars are an instrument of politics, what is the role of reason? 'New wars' are rational in the sense of instrumental rationality. But is rationality the same as reason? The Enlightenment version of reason was different from instrumental rationality. As used by Hegel, it had something to do with the way the state was identified with universal values, the agency that was responsible for the public as opposed to the private interest. The state brought together diverse groups and classes for the purpose of progress – democracy and economic development. What made the trinity 'wondrous' for Clausewitz was that it brought about a fusion of reason and passion that made it possible for real wars to come closer to what he regarded as the absolute perfection.

The political narratives of new wars are based on particularist interests; they are exclusive rather than universalist. Even if sometimes they appeal to universalist language with the claim to self-determination or group rights, these wars tend to be divisive rather than unifying. 'Old wars', as Charles Tilly has shown, played a key role in the construction of the modern state (Tilly, 1998). New wars tend to lead to their deconstruction.

Van Creveld points out, rightly I think, that Clausewitz neglected the role of international law. What van Creveld calls the war convention is composed of law and custom and is, in his opinion, what distinguishes war from crime.

> The paradox is that war, the most confused and confusing of all human activities is also one of the most organised. If armed conflict is to be carried out with any prospect of success, then it must involve the trained cooperation of men working as a team. Men cannot cooperate, nor can organisations even exist, unless they subject themselves to a common code of behaviour. The code in question should be in accord with the prevailing cultural climate, clear to all, and capable of being enforced (Van Creveld, 1991, p. 89).

Law derives from universal values, to which states subscribe. Hence a state could be said to be identified with reason if it acts within the framework of law.

New wars deliberately violate both the war convention and the growing body of human rights law that has been established since 1945. Precisely because they reject the norms and customs that underpin the law, they cannot provide a basis for peaceful political authority that is the necessary condition for peace and the construction of a state. Their power depends on fear and hatred, on perpetual mobilisation, which in turn depends on the continuation of war. In other words, they may be rational, in terms of the functionality or instrumentality of war for particular interests, but they are not reasonable, that is, rational in terms of universal values.

Hence to summarise: first, the idea of the trinity is only relevant nowadays if we think of it merely as uniting the disparate tendencies in war. If we think that the trinity is a way of harnessing passion to 'reason' then it is only relevant where war is authorised by a legitimate political authority seen to be acting in the common good and, in Clausewitz's time, this was the state.

Secondly, new wars are rational in the sense of being instrumental. But they are not reasonable. Reason has

something to do with universally accepted norms that underpin national and international law.

Thirdly, new wars are a continuation of politics by other means. But they are about politics, not policy. They are about political mobilisation or manipulation rather than achieving a specific policy aim. They are about capturing power rather than pursuing political programmes.

This argument applies to the role of states in new wars as well as to disparate groups of nonstate actors. In the time of Clausewitz (and of Hegel), states based on cabinet government could be regarded as the repositories of reason in the sense of public or universal morality and not just of logic. In the aftermath of the unlimited wars of the 19th and 20th centuries, we no longer accept that the nation state, even the United States, is capable of reconciling universal interests. Just like nonstate groups, states represent particularist interests. The big break with Clausewitz is the unacceptability of mass slaughter and our consciousness of humanity as a single community. 'Perhaps, by-and-by', wrote Clausewitz, 'Bonaparte's campaigns will be looked upon as mere acts of barbarism and stupidity and we shall turn once more with satisfaction to the dress sword of obsolete and musty institutions and forms' (Clausewitz, 1997, p. 244).

Is this what has happened in the post-1945 period? Certainly the cold war was a way of reminding us of the past. The new wars, however, although they often hark back to past battles and past shedding of blood, are not a return to pre-Clausewitzean wars. They have to be understood in terms of the stresses and strains imposed on nation states as a consequence of opening up to the rest of the world; they are both cause and consequence of the erosion of nation states under the impact of global interdependence. At the same time, multilateral institutions, like the United Nations or the European Union, have become more important as security actors, with a responsibility for minimising conflicts and war. In contrast to nation states, whose role was to protect their own citizens from war, that is, foreign attacks, these institutions have a much more global responsibility to protect people in distant parts of the world who are vulnerable to war and violence. Can some of the insights of Clausewitz about the role of reason and morality in war be rescued for the use of the international community 'in these global times'?

Implications for the use of force under the authority of international institutions

Although Clausewitz's theory of war can be regarded as a realist theory, he did believe that the interconnectedness of states would reduce the likelihood of war. Interestingly, he makes this argument in Book VI to show that international support for those who defend their countries against attack is one of the explanations for the relative strength of the defence.

> If, for instance, we look at the various states composing Europe at the present time, we find (without speaking of a systematically regulated balance of power and interests, as that does not exist, and therefore is often with justice disputed) that the great and small states and interests of nations are interwoven with each other in a most diversified and changeable manner, each of these points of intersection forming a binding knot … In this manner, the whole relations of all states to each other serve rather to preserve the stability of the whole, than to produce changes, that is to say, *this tendency* to stability exists in general. This we conceive to be a true notion of a balance of power, and in the sense it will always of itself come into existence wherever there are extensive connections between civilised states (Clausewitz, 1997, p. 289, emphasis in original).

Nowadays those extensive connections are even denser. The establishment of the United Nations and the European Union codified the interest in stability. The United Nations Charter forbids the use of military force except in self-defence or under the authority of the United Nations Security Council. It could be argued that international operations, involving the use of military forces and authorised by international institutions, which are designed to prevent war and/or keep the peace, are nowadays closer to a conception of public authority based on a notion of the common good because they are authorised by groups of countries often under humanitarian pressures. The United Nations Security Council or the European Council could be regarded as the international equivalent of Clausewitz's cabinet, for all their flaws and shortcomings that also applied to national cabinets in Clausewitz's day.

How these international forces are used depends on how the wars are conceptualised. If wars are seen as contests of wills, then the aim is either to win those wars in which one side is understood to be on the side of international norms – say, intervention to stop aggression – in which case international forces engage in war fighting, or negotiations between the warring parties, in which cases international forces act as peacekeepers, monitoring ceasefires and separating the warring parties. The problem is that where wars are mutual enterprises, such an approach can make things worse. Military intervention, as in Iraq or Afghanistan, can intensify violence, enhance the justification for conflict, destroy legitimate economies and sharpen polarisation. Efforts to attack insurgents can result in collateral damage and attract new recruits to the insurgency. Negotiations between the warring parties can at best result in a temporary ceasefire but can also end up legitimising those who have a long-term interest in violence and crime.

If the wars are understood as mutual enterprises, however, then the strategy is quite different. The aim has to

be to prevent or end inconclusive wars, to treat them as illegitimate. This can only be done through strengthening non-sectarian identities, establishing a rule of law and developing alternative legitimate ways of making a living so as to undermine the interests of the warring parties in violence. A first prerequisite is to create peaceful spaces where civil society can debate its future free of fear and where humanitarian assistance can be provided and reconstruction and development can be initiated. The primary task of the military in such situations together with police and civilian agencies is not to attack or defeat those who inflict violence but to create those spaces by protecting civilians and preventing violence through the (re-)establishment of a law-based framework for security. It is only within such a framework that it is possible to construct a politics based on reason and not fear and an economics based on a regulated market rather than criminality.

This is a very difficult and dangerous task. How it could be done is, of course, beyond the scope of this article,[3] but it is possible to apply a Clausewitzean methodology to such operations. The task of international peacekeeping forces could be defined in an ideal way as the use of military force to protect civilians and to dampen down violence. The real role of the military will, of course, differ from this for a variety of reasons – the tendency to fight those that are attacking civilians, the inadequacy of training, equipment, commitment, political backing and so on. The McCrystal strategy for Afghanistan is an interesting example. General McCrystal has issued a directive prohibiting air strikes that might involve civilian casualties and he has made it clear that the overall strategy is population security, which means protecting civilians and creating space for local consultations and for reconstruction.[4] But in reality, the continued political narrative about defeating al-Qa'eda and America's enemies and the knee jerk reaction of military forces to being attacked has made it very difficult to put this ideal strategy into practice.

As well as Clausewitz's method of argument, some of his insights about what is required from those who are conducting operations, based on reason in a Clausewitzean sense, could also be applied in trying to bring international operations closer to the ideal.

The first is, of course, the need for political control over such operations. Generally such operations should involve both military and civilian personnel since the task requires policing skills, the provision of basic services and legal experts, as well as military forces. I would argue that this means there needs to be a civilian in charge, someone who has direct access to the politics of the sending countries, who can report directly to the UN Security Council or the European Council, and can communicate and engage with the politics of both sending and receiving countries. Perhaps this is the biggest problem in Afghanistan where the civilian international leadership is hardly visible – the United Nations Special Representative or the American Special Representative (Richard Holbrooke) – and where the Afghan government is engaged in many of the criminal activities that sustain the conflict.

The second is the relevance of Clausewitz's ruminations on the role of military genius. The commander, according to Clausewitz, should not necessarily be an intellectual but he (or she nowadays) should have a cognitive grasp of the situation, both geographically and politically. He (or she) should have what Clausewitz called the *coup d'oeil* – an intuitive ability to see through the fog of war at a glance and understand what is happening. He (or she) should be able to identify the 'centre of gravity' – the point at which, in this case political economic as well as security, forces should be concentrated. This insight could be applied to international civilian leaders nowadays; outstanding United Nations officials like Lakhdar Brahimi or Sergio de Mello who understand what is going on locally can make a real difference when they are deployed, even though such officials are currently rare.

The third insight has to do with the importance of moral forces. Clausewitz is often regarded as the advocate of superior numbers – the 'mahdi of the mass' as Basil Liddell Hart called him, the source of the Powell-Weinberger doctrine of overwhelming force. But although, of course, Clausewitz does advocate superior numbers, over and over again he stresses the combination of numerical strength and will, of both physical and moral forces. One of the biggest obstacles to successful international operations is the lack of individual commitment on the part of those engaged in these operations, who are often far from home, on very short-term (sometimes badly paid) contracts, and who feel little personal identification with the local situation. Even if they are well paid, economic interest is never sufficient to compensate for danger. Risking your life for humanity sounds inspiring but it is also very abstract. Much more needs to be done in terms of training and the public profile of such missions to increase the moral commitment of and support for those engaged in global missions.

In a memorandum written to his pupil, the Crown Prince Frederick William, and included as an appendix to Book III of *On War*, Clausewitz says that the most important characteristic of a commander is 'heroic decision based on reason'. Most new wars are unheroic since they attack civilians and/or often involve attacks at long distance using artillery or air strikes. And as I have argued, they are indecisive and unreasonable (though not necessarily irrational). But 'heroic decision based on reason' might be not be a bad guideline for the new type of robust peacekeeping, which involves soldiers operating on the ground, sometimes with minimal protection, risking their lives like police or fire fighters in order to save the lives of others, to stop attacks on civilians and to mobilise people against war.

Notes

1. Clausewitz, *On War* (all quotations are from the 1997 English edition published by Wordsworth and based on the translation by J. J. Graham, revised by P. N. Maude).
2. According to Walter Gorlitz: 'There is it is true, no proof that Hegel's philosophy had influenced him or that he had read his works, but very often the thought of a particular period seems to lie, so to speak, in the air' (Gorlitz, 1953, p. 62).
3. For an extensive discussion of how this might be done, see Beebe and Kaldor, 2010.
4. See 'United States Government Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan', 2009, available from: http://www.comw.org/qdr/fulltext/0908eikenberryandmcchrystal.pdf

References

Angstrom, J. (2003) 'Introduction', in J. Angstrom and I. Duyvesteyn, *Rethinking the Nature of War: Clausewitz and his Critics Revisited*. Stockholm: Swedish National Defence College, pp. 1–20.

Beebe, S. and Kaldor, M. (2010) *The Ultimate Weapon is No Weapon: Human Security and the New Rules of War and Peace*. New York: Public Affairs.

Clausewitz, C. von (1997) *On War*. Ware: Wordsworth.

Comaroff, J. L. and Comaroff, J. (eds) (1999) *Civil Society and the Political Imagination in Africa: Critical Perspectives*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Echevarria, A. (2007) *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gorlitz, W. (1953) *History of the German General Staff*, trans. B. Battershaw. London: Hallis and Carter.

Hegel, G. W. F. (1996) *Philosophy of Right*. New York: Prometheus Books.

Heuser, B. (2002) *Reading Clausewitz*. London: Pimlico.

Hoffman, S. and Fidler, D. P. (eds) (1991) *Rousseau on International Relations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Kaldor, M. (2007) *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era*, second edition. Cambridge: Polity.

Keegan, J. (1993) *A History of Warfare*. London: Hutchinson.

Smith, R. (2005) *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*. London: Allen Lane.

Strachan, H. (2007a) 'Clausewitz and the Dialectics of War', in H. Strachan and A. Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz and the Twenty First Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 14–44.

Strachan, H. (2007b) *Carl von Clausewitz's On War*. London: Atlantic Books.

Tilly, C. (1998) *Coercion, Capital and European States AD 990–1990*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Van Creveld, M. (1991) *The Transformation of War*. New York: Free Press.

Author Information

Mary Kaldor, Co-Director, LSE Global Governance, London School of Economics and Political Science.