

Clausewitz and Contemporary War: The Debate over War's Nature

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The views discussed in this presentation are solely the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of the US Government.

Outline

- Significance
- Conflicting Views
- Why Clausewitz's Concept Still Applies
- Thoughts on Nature of Contemporary War

Significance

- The nature of a thing (its principal properties) influences perceptions of how it can be used, for what ends.
 - Hawks vs Doves: political, cultural, ethical debates
 - Service influence: air-, land-, sea power
- Also influences frequency of its use, and parameters.
 - Wars of choice vs wars of necessity
 - Laws of war, rules of engagement
- Central to corpus of knowledge for military professionals.
 - Exclusive knowledge(?)
 - Doctrine: principles, procedures
 - Theory: concepts, education
- But difficult: nature must capture all variations, historical and contemporaneous.

Conflicting Views: Pro-Clausewitzian

- “The nature of war is immutable.” –LTG(R) Van Riper
- “The essential nature of war has not changed, is not changing, and will never change...” –LTG(R) Dubik
- “The nature of warfare and conflict between nations and states is fundamentally unchanging... However, the character of warfare is changing just as societies, political entities and technologies change.” –VADM(R) Cebrowski
- “The fundamental nature of war will change about the same time the fundamental chemical composition of water changes.” –GEN Mattis
- **Sum:** Pro-Clausewitzians believe war, by its nature, is violent, chaotic, and prone to escalation; and this has always been and will always be the case.

Conflicting Views: Anti-Clausewitzian

- The nature of war has fundamentally changed since Cold War.
 - Globalization
 - Violent nonstate actors, identity wars (Kaldor, et al)
 - Non-Trinitarian (irregular) wars (van Creveld)
- Information technology has fundamentally altered nature of war.
 - RMA doctrines: use knowledge to replace mass
 - Eliminate uncertainty, “Lifting Fog of War” (ADM(R) Owens)
 - Precision engagement (standoff warfare), reduce risk (LTG(R) Deptula)
- **Sum:** Anti-Clausewitzians believe war’s nature is whatever we make it; Clausewitz’s theories are *passé*, have not kept up with revolutionary technological (and social) changes.

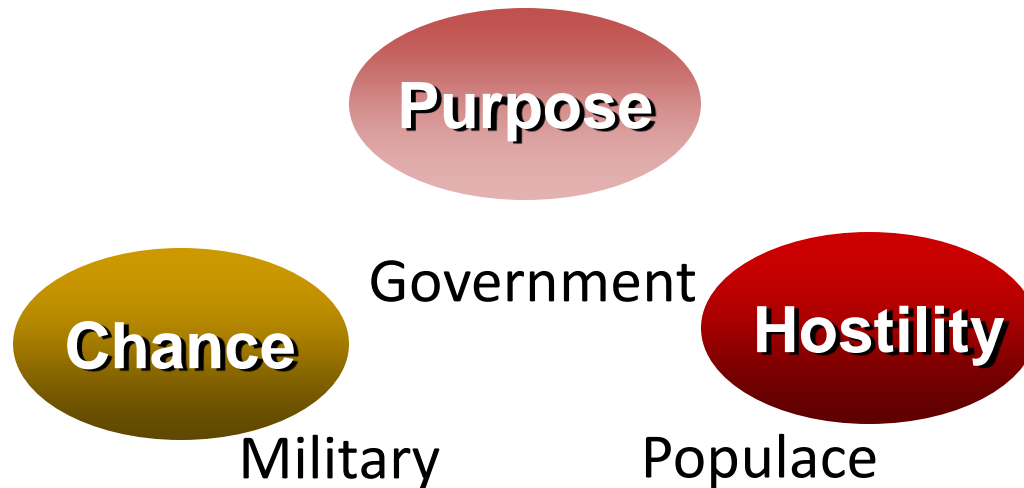
More Than Semantics

- War = to contend; to strive; to be in a state of hostility or contention; armed conflict; any state of violent opposition or conflict.
- Warfare = to engage in war; to contend; to struggle; armed contest or struggle; hostilities; action of waging war; conflict of any kind.
- Nature = quality or qualities that make a thing what it is; its essential *character*.
- Character = the essential quality or *nature* of a thing; a distinct trait or attribute.

What Did Clausewitz Say?

Pro- and anti-Clausewitzian views inaccurate, incomplete:

- War has a “composite and changeable” nature.
- Its composite parts are three dynamic forces: purpose, chance, hostility.



- Each part has ability to change, which alters whole, and causes the conduct of war to adjust.

Clausewitzian Nature of War

- Claiming war's nature is "immutable" is both redundant and misleading.
- War is an "instrument" as well as an "environment" – for military, policymakers, and populace.
- War has no inner law driving it to escalate; instead, escalation is a function of political choices in an environment of uncertainty.
- Laws of probability apply rather than laws of logical necessity.
- Cannot make nature of war *ad hoc*: cannot simply ignore some components, institutions and invent new ones.

Nature of Contemporary War

- Globalization and info-media wave has accelerated interaction among components of Trinity:
 - Policy can now play greater role in directing war; but, is tied more closely to events, exposed to more criticism.
 - Expanded (global) operational environment: more neutral players (NGOs, IGOs, etc).
 - Hostility can spread more quickly, harder to manage: greater anonymity; but more voices.
 - Information both reduces and increases chance and uncertainty; and is nothing without power.

