

# Clausewitz is Dead

*Clausewitz's definitions and conceptions of war pervade U.S. military doctrine and thinking. It is understandable why, but as the U.S. faces new adversaries in new eras, it risks doing itself a great disservice if it fails to consider all theories of war and conflict, especially as U.S. competitors—becoming potential adversaries, employ drastically different approaches to competition and conflict. Merely studying a theorist, like Sun Tzu, is not the same as reconsidering deeply held beliefs, deconstructing beliefs, then rebuilding new beliefs and understanding based on the realities of the world one lives in at that precise moment. It is not an easy task to question the philosophy of one's rearing. Clausewitz is Dead (CiD) is meant to provoke readers into such a state of open-mindedness, maybe making the task slightly easier by showing them starting points. Dr. Keith Dickson, Professor Emeritus at the Joint Advanced Warfighting School, will respond to submitted questions, conduct interviews, and sometimes do both, assuming the identity of Clausewitz. Readers are encouraged to submit their questions to [Campaigning@ndu.edu](mailto:Campaigning@ndu.edu).*

## The Return of Clausewitz

Dear CiD,

The US Military is deeply, culturally, and practically, invested in Clausewitzian Theory and conceptions of war. What's wrong with that?

—A Student

Dear A Student,

The acolytes of the master, so silent and confused over the events of the past 20 years, are now enjoying a resurgence of attention. Gone are the frustrating days of trying to fit the Clausewitzian concept of war into the troublesome context of what were called wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (and Syria) (and Libya). The fog of what war is has been cleared away in recent months, replaced with a new clarity of vision and purpose.

Clausewitzian war is back and with a vengeance. Taiwan and Ukraine<sup>1</sup> offer the prospect of the threat of confrontation between the United States and either the Russian Federation or the People's Republic of China (or both). No more uncertainties about who the enemy is; no more confusion about goals and objectives; no doubts about what war is or what it will look like. Both China and Russia are stridently building their nuclear capability. Hypersonics are the weapon du jour. Over 100,000 Russian troops are amassed near the border with Ukraine. China continues to build a navy that already outnumbers the U.S. Navy. All of it music to the ears of the adherents of Clausewitz. The time is now, they must be saying, to pull down from the shelf the Howard and Paret translation (the white Princeton University Press paperback, of course) and delve once again into the unambiguous, tried and true principles, now newly comforted by the prospect of *real* war. Let us linger lovingly, letting our eyes caress the contours of some clauses:

War, in its highest forms, is not an *infinite mass of minor events*, analogous despite their diversities, which can be controlled. . . . War consists rather of *single, great decisive actions*, each of which needs to be handled individually.<sup>2</sup>

In the highest realms of strategy . . . there is little or no difference between strategy, policy and statesmanship, and there, as we have already said, their influence is greater in questions of quantity and scale than in forms of execution. . . . Once it has been determined, from the political conditions, what a war is meant to achieve and what it can achieve, it is *easy* to chart the course.<sup>3</sup>

Breathtaking, isn't it? To be able to read these words, and so many others like them, in the context of a crisis with a great power is a polytheistic incantation that arouses palpitations. From nuclear deterrence to forces in contact, Clausewitz charts the course. Single decisive actions guided by political conditions of what is achievable. The U.S. military is back in business. The Navy and the Air Force, especially, will see their blue and white dreams coming true, and the war colleges—undoubtedly—are tuning a curriculum that hammers home again and again the purity, and the unity, and the excellence of Clausewitz's dictums. They apply now, more than ever, will be the message. Study Clausewitz and approach war with the singlemindedness of a true believer: the character of war is continuously unfolding, but the nature of war is invariable. Clausewitz will become the foundation of all war planning. Anyone and everyone will have a Clausewitz quote up their sleeves to justify their operational approach. Clausewitz will be the convenient authority any flag officer can casually refer to when dealing with Congress. It does not appear to be a hard sell. The money is already identified. Congress is pouring billions into weapons systems and technology. The service chiefs confidently assert the systems will be essential to fight war in its highest form, war congruent to Clausewitzian dicta. Most important of all, desired political goals will be achieved as a result. One follows the other, naturally.

Although the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General John Hyten, offered a note of caution just before retiring, stating that it's a bad idea to go to war with a nuclear power, it appears that the military community has not begun to relearn and reapply Clausewitz to issues of nuclear deterrence or nuclear war itself. Howard and Paret published their translation of *On War* in 1976, when high-level strategists in the U.S. were contemplating how to wage a nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Clausewitz seems to resonate with those strategists, who determined that even nuclear war had a place in the context of war. As Clausewitz said, "wars waged by both sides to the full extent of their national strength must be conducted on different principles from wars in which policy was based on the comparative size of the regular armies."<sup>4</sup> The U.S. military, it appears, is returning to its safe space of comfort and certainty. No one has to learn anything new, just get back to the basics and dig into Clausewitz. There you will find all your answers.

Wrapped in this comforting cocoon, it is easy to forget that other fires are smoldering. France is withdrawing forces from Mali, even as armed groups struggle for control over the northern and central part of the country; Ethiopia battles the Tigray Liberation Front with atrocities multiplying daily; Syria is the never ending bloodbath being exploited by just about everyone; the Sagaing region of Myanmar is being leveled by troops who conduct massacres of civilians

without fear of reprisals. Clausewitz is very far away from these places and the conditions that exist cannot be found in *On War*. As the U.S. military contemplates the purest form of war, a condition that, we hope, actually has very remote possibilities of happening, the non-Clausewitzian conflicts noted above, (and others like them), play the role of Banquo's ghost in the banquet halls of the services celebrating a return to certainty, regularity, and predictability.

—Doc Dickson<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Editorial Note: The response was drafted and cleared for publication prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine on Thursday, 24 February 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008), 153. Italics present in original.

<sup>3</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008), 178. Italics added for emphasis by the author.

<sup>4</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008), 220.

<sup>5</sup> The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official policy or position of Joint Forces Staff College, National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.