REFLECTIONS on WAR
Preparedness and Consequences

Thean Potgieter & Ian Liebenberg (Eds)
REFLECTIONS ON WAR
PREPAREDNESS AND CONSEQUENCES

EDITORS
Thean Potgieter & Ian Liebenberg

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This publication was researched and authored individually or in teams by members of the Faculty of Military Science, Stellenbosch University (the South African Military Academy). They produced what we believe is a noteworthy work in the field of the military sciences. The work is relevant within our context as it reflects on war, the challenges of preparing for war and perhaps more importantly, also poses warnings and raises critical questions for the future.

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Introduction

Literature in the field of Military Science is, to a large extent, concerned with the experience of war, the impact of armed conflict and its aftermath, or with policies and the relevant political issues. It often focuses on the great military leaders, the successes or failures linked to the application of military power, on strategic, operational and tactical approaches, on the impact of war and conflict on society and on human resource aspects.

War readiness, in particular the readiness of military forces, is frequently written about, usually in the aftermath of a conflict and with the hindsight that personal experience and archives provide. Or, the victors write the history of their own conquering prowess, frequently consciously or unconsciously producing a totalising project that dismisses the trials and tribulations of violent conflict and thereby contributes to a collective forgetfulness.

As a gap exists in the sphere of discourse on “going to war”, or perhaps rather “not going to war”, it made the choice of a main theme for the book obvious. It had to explore when is it possible for nations or countries to go to war or to sustain armed conflict? This required investigating the issues linked to maintaining and sustaining armed conflict, and/or analysing on what basis countries have gone to war in the past. Imperative to the analysis is the fact that the above argument can also be inverted – namely investigating when not to go to war – an aspect of which the contributors were acutely aware.

Our contribution intends to cover this lacuna between war preparedness, the consequences of war and the need for foresight when considering utilising military force or projecting military power towards other countries, communities or states. It further points to the need not only to think about post-conflict reconstruction, but rather the prevention of conflict. This study demonstrates that our understanding of conflict and war is not only about battles, campaigns, worthwhile causes, attractive ideologies (even disguised as “political realism”) and the ability to field manned and unmanned weaponry and the like; but we also have to carefully and thoroughly consider what we mean by discussing the projection of arms in the medium- and long-term and the human cost involved.

The result is not just another publication on war or conflict. Because we understand how destructive war and violent conflict is, some consideration and warnings are given about going to war or deploying armed forces. In a time when much sabre rattling takes place and where major powers even abuse their power under the guise of the right to protect, war or aggression against others under the pretence of protection is too great a danger to allow it to be defined as “stuff that just happened”. Going to war remains a decision to be made with great care and the hindsight of past experiences, and as such, some reflection on the nature of war and why it occurs is imperative.

History provides a picture of constant alternation between war and peace. War is an inherent part of the social totality, and “differs from the whole only by its specific means”. Wars cause great and lasting damage. Whether started by large and strong states against smaller or weaker states, caused by a clash over scarce resources or as a desperate retaliation by people, marginalised groups or (proto-) nations that feel themselves oppressed, war is a common
activity in human society. It has destroyed great empires and great cultures, scared societies for
generations, impacted on the mentality of societies, destroyed infrastructure, the social fabric,
political systems and freedom, and has created or stimulated revolutions. Unlike other activities
in which societies regularly engage, wars demonstrate the inherent fragility of man and what
the human species has created. Wars, even small wars (irregular wars), frequently touch the line
between speaking truth into power and using power to suppress the voice of those trampled
upon by the powerful. Such a discussion can not be without multiple complexities.

Since the seventeenth century a number of developments have made war much more destructive
and menacing; a spectre with lasting consequences to be undertaken with considerable care.
Besides the extent of the territory and resources controlled by states, highly structured and
developed states have become more effective, have created standing armed forces and become
capable of wielding many more destructive resources. Fundamental industrial progress has
taken war to new heights with devastating effect. Quite simply put, the rapid improvement
in transport, the development of more effective and destructive armaments and progress in
communications have made it possible to deliver more men over vast distances with more
deadly weapons into battle more quickly. In addition these men can be supported by a vast
arsenal of weapons and sensors capable of being deployed anywhere, from subsurface to space,
manned and unmanned.

Though it is claimed that war is sometimes waged to attain peace, the use of military power is
closely associated with political and economic objectives. This was already clearly illustrated in
antiquity during the conflict between Sparta and Athens as Pericles’ strategy essentially entailed
avoiding risks, wearing down the Spartans, and working for a negotiated peace on the basis of
the status quo ante bellum.

In all forms, even when limited, war is still terrible. It is “a frightful thing” and unsettling to
observe, as Joseph II of Austria exclaimed when on campaign in 1778, “with the destruction of
fields and villages, the lamentation of the poor peasants, the ruin of so many innocent people
and, for myself, the disturbances I experienced …”. War is, as Clausewitz observed, “an act of
violence pushed to its utmost bounds.”

Why are wars and conflict so common? Is man inherently aggressive? Or somatically wedged
into the territorial imperative? It seems that humankind is one of but a few species that kills
en masse.

Since Thucydides endeavoured to explain why Greek city states fought each other in the
destructive Peloponnesian War (nearly two and a half thousand years ago), many books on why
wars break out have appeared. Thucydides explained that the Peloponnesian War was inevitable
because of “the growth of Athenian power and the fear this caused in Sparta.” Fear versus the
growth of power. The resultant desire to maintain a balance of power is a common cause of
war. In the history of the world a number of wars have been caused by similar conditions and
states have often been prepared to go to war in order to maintain the power symmetry. Many
and varied other causes of war can be identified. States engage in wars on false pretexts; on
the notion that quick gains, which would be impossible in normal diplomacy, can be achieved
through war; due to the emotional hype of societies; for resources and control over them,
dynastic reasons, religion, economic reasons, or because of political and ideological reasons.
When states choose to resort to the use of their armed forces against another state, the reasons are generally eclectic and comprehensive and the result of the conflicting aims of the rival states. It is usually an oversimplification to emphasise only one reason for war, but states or groups of people that wish to achieve their aims through the utilisation of force, will often, before and afterwards, offer only a simplified explanation.

Developing through the bloody dynastic activities of the Middle Ages and the early Modern Era, by the eighteenth century Frederick the Great of Prussia saw war pre-eminently as a function of *staatspolitik* – it has remained so ever since. Before 1914 war was almost universally considered as acceptable or even inevitable; as a way to settle international disputes. Social Darwinists saw war as inevitable and an accepted necessity if the world wished to progress. Simply put; force could be seen as the way of the world. As Clausewitz explains, war is “a clash between major interests that is resolved by bloodshed – that is the only way in which it differs from other conflicts”.

The industrial revolution made war more lethal and enhanced the capacity of states to wield destructive power. However, the development of weapons brought a new element: states had to consider their security. As states endeavoured to match or exceed the power of an adversary, arms races became a dangerous and expensive activity, dangerous because tension deriving from the arms races could stimulate war.

Wars can also occur for egotistical reasons: Ideological fervour was important in causing the Wars of the French Revolution, as was swaggering aggression, which also caused the war between the United States and Spain in 1898. When aggression is linked to greed, devastation follows. This is what happened when the British aspired to gain control of the vast gold reserves of the Witwatersrand: it caused the utterly destructive Anglo-Boer War or South African War in 1899 and the death of large numbers of South Africans (both Black and White) in British concentration camps. Colonialist aspirations to control land in German South West Africa led to the genocide of the Herero nation in what is now known as Namibia. Herero resistance to German control over land that had been settled by them long before, led to the brutal war against a people posing no threat to a world power like the German Empire of the time.

As statesmen often endeavour to discern dangers before they become immediate, or to eliminate potential threats, wars usually occur for reasons perceived as crucial at the time, and not necessarily as a result of the bellicosity of statesmen. Though hindsight frequently provides clearer insight and with it a condemnation of actions or the lack of action, it is important to try and understand the context and the time within which such events occur. Going to war is often justified by public opinion as in 1914, yet at the time an immense naivety existed amongst the populations of Europe with regards to the nature of war, what war in the industrial age would entail as well as the vast impact such wars would have on state and society. As in the case between Athens and Sparta, states wished to maintain their power by going to war in 1914, yet the opposite occurred; the war caused them to lose much of it and in some cases even brought revolutionary changes to the state itself.

The Indian stance on international security is worth noting as the “fundamental question India asks is not how to maintain security in a state of anarchy in international relations, but how to maintain peace in a society of nation states.” Inherent to this approach is the recognition
that the roots of conflict need to be tackled (conflict resolution, not conflict management or violent reaction to conflict) and the imperative is to try and resolve conflict without recourse to violence. Yet, even for India, recourse to the application of military power has been an unavoidable necessity as the wars between India and Pakistan testify.

States, or groups professing to form states, have often fought to be, or to have the right to be, independent. This has been the case for centuries and the second half of the twentieth century saw many conflicts occurring for this reason in Asia and Africa and within states. Internal conflict or conflicts within states usually derive from conflicting claims or interests, or conflicting ideologies or perceptions. With more than one contender competing for the power of the state, it causes a situation referred to as multiple sovereignty. The problem that has to be managed in such situations is how to control the societal conflict and not allow it to erupt into war. Success in many of these cases did not depend on military prowess, but rather political expediency dictated outcomes. However, engaging in such conflicts is a precarious activity, and the stakes could be high as it entails the existence, creation and elimination of states, or even entire strata of a population.

The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau pointed out that without sovereign states there would be no wars. However, as Hobbes emphasised, the converse is probably truer, there would be no peace either – cases where the state has disintegrated bear witness to the fact that our existence would probably be brutish, nasty and short. War is therefore the only type of conflict that may legitimately be settled by the application of armed force.

Liberal scholars have abhorred the obscenity of war and to them it is a “pathological aberration from the norm”, a ghastly mistake or even a crime. Those that instituted wars must have been “sick”, or criminals or victims of forces beyond their control. Yet history has shown that even “reasonable” causes for war have been cited by them and that statesmen sometimes have no recourse but to rely on the application of military power.

Accepting the fact that war and conflict are an inherent feature of human history is important for understanding the focus of this book – it has more to do with why decisions to deploy armed force should be very carefully made, or avoided if possible, than with warfighting. To achieve this objective a trans-disciplinary approach was taken. The various chapters contain views from diverse perspectives and the authors endeavoured to inform the central theme from the vantage point of different disciplines.

The authors provide background on the complexity of the problem and relevant theoretical frameworks where possible, consider historical examples and themes relevant to sustaining armed conflict, discuss relevant concepts pertaining to sustaining armed conflict, identify pertinent strategic issues and real constraints, indicate specific pitfalls, illustrate errors countries, states or multinational actors have made and explain which key “lessons” have been “learned” with reference to relevant case studies. Though many of these contextual examples are historical in nature, sufficient references to contemporary examples exist, which certainly pose warnings about how states should do business in our time.

In compiling their chapters, authors also pointed out the problématique of supporting a war effort on an economic, social and political level, identified the critical preparations sustained armed
conflict requires, and made recommendations on important variables to be considered before countries should engage in armed conflict. Their purpose was not to develop new theories and concepts, but rather to inform the reader about the risks inherent to sustaining armed conflict. As far as sources are concerned, authors drew from reputable and established sources regarding the specific subject or field of study. Some authors relied on secondary sources and qualitative research, while others also used primary sources and did archival research.

In the first chapter Thean Potgieter makes the crucial link between theory, strategy and objectives in war, and indicates the relevance of theory for understanding and explaining the timeless and constant phenomena of war and conflict. Due to the vastness of available literature on military theory and strategy, a comprehensive analysis is not possible and the chapter shares notes on the relevance of theory, the relationship between theory and our understanding of war, the application of military power and the magnitude of variables to be considered when deploying military forces. An effort was made to indicate what strategy is and why it is important and as the examples used indicate, various strategic choices are possible. The chapter also poses an emphatic warning: the strategic approach should be appropriate. As conflict or war is directed by political leadership, clear and coherent policy objectives are required. Such objectives are supposed to be rational and the correlation between ends and means ought to be apparent. When states decide to employ armed force, it is therefore for a political purpose and the point is made that strategic decision making would be difficult without a proper appreciation of military theory and military history. Strategic choices should be made within the context of applying military power for a political purpose and those that make strategic decisions and employ military power must therefore understand the limitations inherent to the application of military force.

In chapter two Deon Visser outlines the theory and practice of military preparedness in history from the birth of modern conventional warfare to the contemporary age of internal conflict and asymmetrical warfare. The chapter explores, firstly, the development of military theory and the formulation of certain principles of war in the pursuit of success on the battlefield, with reference to the work of Sun Tzu, Jomini, Clausewitz and others. Thereafter it investigates the utilisation of the “lessons” of military history as guidelines for military preparation in peace time; the impact of popular scenarios and unexpected contingencies on military preparation and military preparedness; military preparation in the face of known and constant threats; the failure of military leaders to learn from past wars; the incorrect application of “lessons” from military history by military leaders; American “lessons” from contemporary conflict and asymmetrical warfare; and military preparation for international peace missions. The author draws on examples from various wars to support his discussion, inter alia the Russian campaigns of Charles XII of Sweden, Napoleon Bonaparte and Adolf Hitler, as well as the Korean, Vietnamese, Arab-Israeli, Indo-Pakistani and Falklands Wars, and the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In chapter three Fankie Monama discusses the experiences of the Union of South Africa and South African society during the Second World War. When war broke out in 1939, the country was thrown into political turmoil as society was divided between pro-war and anti-war factions. The chapter focuses on the development of the political crisis and the nature and extent of the anti-war and anti-government resistance which characterised the Union's wartime experience.
Monama elaborates on the criticisms pertaining to Black participation in the war and reflects on the socio-political dynamics that impacted on the country’s war effort. Finally, the chapter illustrates how the Union government managed the internal security situation and how it facilitated the mobilisation of the population for military service and war production to pursue its war policy.

Chapter four is also a uniquely South African case study. Ian Liebenberg and Francois de Wet explain how racialism, with its origins in colonialism and Eurocentrism, turned into paternalist and authoritarian rule over Black South Africans (1948-1989). Social engineering carries costs and consequences. The contribution here describes the increasing authoritarian elements in the ruling minority party and the militarisation of White society. The chapter reflects on the outcome of one-sided dominant party rule which underestimated the civil resistance amongst South Africans, the nature of a (nationalist) struggle for liberation and the costs of upholding a minority state. It shares with the reader how the economic costs of a protracted internal strife and the projection of aggressive military power in the region eventually brought about the dissolution of the apartheid state by 1994.

In chapter five Abel Esterhuyse provides a brief descriptive analysis of the nature and challenge of preparing military personnel for their task in the defence, military and fighting domains. The discussion is shaped by the importance of military manpower being empowered with the necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes to unlock the military potential of a nation. Underpinning the discussion is the inherent tension between skills-driven training, knowledge-driven education and attitude-driven socialisation. The quantity and quality of personnel is the key element of a country’s military and fighting power. The development of a country’s fighting power, though, is closely linked to the nature of the military as a social organisation and, more specifically, the series of balances that are required between the military, as an extension of the state’s bureaucratic system, and the requirements of the military as an occupational profession. The successful preparation of military personnel, it is argued, is dependent on the management of these tensions and balances.

The thorny issue of the military readiness of South African armed forces is discussed by Francois Vrey in chapter six. Since 2009 the military readiness of South African armed forces has featured intermittently in the news. While politicians spar about how to deal with this issue, the reality of military readiness as a phenomenon embedded in certain concepts and practices, receives little, if any, attention. Military readiness is difficult to understand and also to achieve as ideas abound about what it entails. From the literature it appears that several processes underpin military readiness, while military and political decision makers form an indelible partnership to bring about the required readiness. In the South African case certain conditions appear to facilitate the readiness of the armed forces, but the politico-military nexus fails to merge their efforts effectively. It also seems that the political demands upon the South African military stretch the readiness realm and gives rise to the question: A readiness for what?

In chapter seven Thean Potgieter and Shadrack Ramokgadi pose the warning that casualties are a given when armed forces are deployed. They provide a brief overview of the experiences of armed forces and the fact that implicit to preparing for war, is preparing to take casualties. A thorough military medical organisation is therefore a prerequisite for any country wishing
to sustain armed conflict. Due consideration should also be given to managing both military and civilian casualties as well as the media furore that will occur as a result. The nature and extent of casualties is dependent on various factors, ranging from the type of society waging war to the nature of the specific conflict and the intended objectives. Today, to be ready also implies preparing for a multitude of contingencies, or worst case scenarios, in which an organised military health structure would play an invaluable role. Such scenarios could include peacekeeping or peace-enforcement operations, man-made disasters, or a national crisis that might be the result of a natural disaster. Being unprepared for war, and casualties, could cause untold suffering, while casualties could have a vast political impact and even negate progress on the battlefield.

In chapter eight Hennie Janse van Rensburg and Hennie Smit make the point that geography, in its broadest definition, matters enough to form a vital component of any assessment of the readiness of a country to go to war. Geography can act as both a force multiplier and reducer, and hence has to be planned and prepared for adequately. A military force that is ready to go to war must be geographically enabled. Such geographic enablement consists of, firstly, a national strategy that is based on geopolitical reality, secondly, the infrastructural ability and human resources to provide sustainable geographic intelligence to an entire military force and, lastly, preparation of the force to operate in the physical and cultural terrain in which it will fulfil its mission. By enabling a force geographically, its readiness to deliver on its national security mandate is greatly improved.

Though victory in war rests upon a variety of requisite elements that include planning, leadership, and skill in the use of arms, in chapter nine Benjamin Mokoena argues that notwithstanding these elements, intelligence is always a key factor; permitting success in the planning for, and the conduct of, war. Every state, as it grapples with the question of what conditions must be created to ensure success in defence planning and warfare, ignores the inherently invaluable importance of intelligence at its own peril. In consequence, the purpose of this chapter is to critically analyse the role of intelligence in defence planning and the conduct of war. The chapter includes an examination of the nature of intelligence, a selection of historical cases illustrating the successes of intelligence, constraints relating to intelligence gathering, processing and usage, and lastly, a selection of historical cases pertaining to intelligence failure.

Logistics are the focus of chapter ten by Thean Potgieter and Ishmael Theletsane. Though it is usually the dramatic and heroic side of war that draws attention, most soldiers appreciate the impact logistics have on operational readiness. Logistics keep armed forces supplied and moving, both in peace time and under operational conditions. As armed forces are becoming technologically more advanced and complex, their logistic tails have extended, leaving the fighting end to be supported smaller. Great commanders have, through the centuries, paid much attention to their logistic capabilities as success can not be achieved without taking the necessary precautions to support troops effectively before, during and after military deployments or battles or during post-conflict social reconstruction. Logistics are also concerned with the central relationship between war and cash. If preparing and provisioning armed forces in peace time is expensive, sustaining a war effort multiplies the cost exponentially. As a result, the provisioning of military forces is generally an inherent part of military planning at the highest level. Without logistics and proper provisioning arrangements, military equipment and armaments would
become useless numbers on a table of organisation and equipment. This chapter makes a case for the importance of logistics to military operations whether in a primary or secondary role. It discusses the importance of logistics through the ages, and briefly focuses on contemporary military logistic management and logistics in the South African defence environment.

In chapter 11 Francois Vrey discusses the gravity of the decision by South Africa to return its soldiers to borderline duties during 2010 to replace the police border contingents. This is not a step to be taken lightly as borders feature prominently in the international system of states and represent defining boundaries of sovereignty, vital national interests and statehood. States view borders as important symbols of political and territorial sovereignty and a vital national interest – a matter to secure and even to risk war in its defence. Although governments tend to be clear and stubborn about defending their borders, the physical borderline is often not where threats reside. Borderlines frequently become vague features within the surrounding borderlands where an array of threats and vulnerabilities play out. Governments have a tough time securing borderlands. In addition, governments' fixation with demarcated borderlines repeatedly brings them into contact with unwanted activities in the adjacent border landscapes. A host of challenges arise from borderlands – several of which ascend to the level of national attention and ultimately require securitisation and even military solutions. Such threats can be grouped as aspects of politics that comprise leadership, ideology, people and territory – each of which holds direct challenges to incumbent governments and South Africa is no exception. Governments must recognise that the deployment of soldiers for border control duties entails more than a perceived problematic borderline.

Pieter Brits and Michelle Nel explore the notion of when war can be considered just, in chapter twelve. The just war tradition is as old as humankind itself. It started in the ancient civilizations and reached a high point during the Middle Ages when Thomas Aquinas defined three distinguishable criteria for *jus ad bellum* that still form the basis of all modern just war models. The base criterion of *jus ad bellum* is just cause, which, according to Grotius in the seventeenth century, could consist of defence (which included pre-emptive action), reparation or punishment. After the peace of Westphalia, just cause was narrowed to defence only. The devastating wars of the twentieth century and the increasing role of non-state actors in the twenty-first century necessitated a rethink of just cause, introducing humanitarian intervention and re-introducing pre-emptive strike.

In chapter thirteen Makatipe Charles Kgosana makes the point that public opinion plays a pivotal role in the decision of political decision makers to go to war. This emanates from the inevitable loss that characterises any war and which is ultimately carried by society. Such loss can be material and worse, entails substantial loss of life. This necessitates that the political decision makers convince the populace of the utility and necessity of war. Due to its omnipotent role, the media is at centre stage. Ideally, its role is to convey the message to the populace about the political intent, the utility of the decision to go to war and the context within which it was taken. However, the media is not always neutral. In the light of the inherent communication distortion that characterises mediated communication, the media may become inevitably biased – a reality that is worsened by the phenomenon of embedded journalists. In this process, the media is also involved in creating a reality apart from the reality. The posture assumed by the media is also affected by both political and economic factors. Kgosana’s contribution thoughtfully
discusses the role of public opinion and the media on the road to war, and during the execution of modern war.

In chapter fourteen Francois de Wet and Ian Liebenberg analyse the performance of four economies before and during the Second World War, namely South Africa, Nazi Germany, the United States of America and the United Kingdom. The war influenced their economies substantially. The Allied countries were able to produce all the necessary hardware to arm and sustain their soldiers for the duration of the war. Likewise, South Africa produced not only the arms necessary for its own forces, but also succeeded in producing enough to be exported as assistance to the Allied war effort. In contrast, sustaining the war became economically impossible for Germany and its allies. They argue that the Second World War had a substantial influence on the South African economy and propelled South Africa into a second industrial take-off period. Though much larger in scale, the same can be said about the UK and USA. Already advanced in industrialisation, the Second World War furthered the industrial capacity of the UK and the US – at least for a twenty- to thirty-year cycle (the 1970s and 1980s). The chapter concludes with remarks on the implications of the study and some reflections on the future.

Ian Liebenberg in chapter fifteen addresses the case of Libya and the far-reaching developments in North Africa during 2011. What the international media has termed the Arab Spring demonstrated that European vested interests in scarce resources on the African continent remain undiminished. Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, social disturbances in oil-rich Libya received immediate interventionist treatment from France, the UK and the USA. This chapter investigates the reasons for this military intervention and the foreseeable outcomes of the conflict as well as implications for other African states. Liebenberg argues that what we see in North Africa is about the forceful re-assertion of long-standing USA/European mentalities, and that under current economic conditions and the realistic fear of the implosion of the USA’s economy and Western economic woes, it may well lead to a more forceful and militarist projection of foreign policy by the USA and whoever wishes to join a coalition of the willing. In conclusion the chapter poses some questions about the future and the changing face of armed conflict away from formal war declarations or acts of surprise aggression against opponents and towards military action against what he calls “non-pliant states” through disguised means with the aggressors simultaneously gaining control over valuable scarce resources. The abuse of perceived international agreements, such as United Nations Resolutions, is one example. The questions posed by Liebenberg are: “Have we entered an era of military aggression in order to take control of scarce resources under the cloak of protecting international human rights?” and “What does this mean for the future?” Undoubtedly we are observing a change in how armed conflict is waged and reflecting on these questions has become critical for analysts, practitioners, global civil society and lay people.

The study as a whole demonstrates that understanding of conflict and war is not only about analysing battles and campaigns or war and society. One has to critically consider preparations, objectives and outcomes before utilising armed force. The central message that appears is therefore unequivocal throughout – be careful of “war”, rather prevent it than enter it, but understand what the deployment of military power will demand.
This work was marked by interaction to enhance the integrated nature of the research. Authors interacted with fellow contributors and colleagues to ensure coherence. The peer review process involved both international and South African colleagues from universities, tertiary institutions, military professional development institutions and various specialists in civil society. Care was taken to further the multi-disciplinary approach; to involve reviewers from different disciplines to comment critically on the work of the authors, i.e., a historian received feedback from another historian and a political scientist or sociologist; an economist received feedback from another economist but also a sociologist or military historian and so on. Each chapter went through an internal review by fellow contributors and the editors before being sent out to the national and international reviewers.

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References

Chapter 1

Considering theory, strategy and objectives in war

Thean Potgieter

INTRODUCTION

As war is one of the oldest human activities, it is difficult to trace the origins of military thought. It can be accepted that due to the survival instinct in an environment no doubt noted for its bellicosity, early man learned from his elders, not only the tricks of fighting (tactics), but also the tricks of securing existence over a period of time (strategy). Competition, taking what is not yours and defending what is valuable, is unfortunately an inherent part of our existence and evidence of man being engaged in deadly competition with his fellow man certainly predates written records. Ancient texts, both Western and Eastern, provide various treatises on the subject of war.

When judging the progress of civilisation many scientists underplay war and consider its effects peripheral to human endeavours as it is abhorred for its obscenity and destruction and because it has violence at its core.¹ It is considered that such a phenomenon can certainly not contribute to the advancement of society. Yet, despite its horrific nature, war has impacted on political society, the formulation of states, technological advances, the structure and preparation of economic activities, and the planning for war and peace.²

The important issue is not to desire war, but to understand this important phenomenon and how to prevent or manage it, rather than be obliterated by it. This is where the utility of military theory and strategic thought come into play. It certainly has to do with the art of defining and achieving realistic ends with a deadly instrument such as the application of military power. In fact it is often argued that adequate preparation for war will ensure peace.

The literature on military theory and strategy is extensive. To provide a comprehensive description or complete analysis here is not possible. As a result this chapter simply aims to share notes on the relevance of theory, the relationship between theory and our understanding of war, the application of military power and the magnitude of variables to be considered when deploying military forces. Without a proper grasp of military theory and military history, strategy and making strategic choices would be difficult, if not an inconceivable exercise. Theory is relevant for understanding and analysing strategic thought. Put in another way, theory is fundamental for appreciating how to apply military power to achieve political ends. This is the context within which strategic choices must be made and strategic decision makers should – or are impelled to – understand the limitations inherent to the application of military force. Strategy influences the nature of war and its outcomes.
MILITARY THEORY: THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING WAR AND STRATEGY

The use or threat of physical force has, through the ages, been the most basic way of asserting power or controlling the immediate environment. As Michael Howard has emphasised, studying war is important for developing “a theory that will enable us to explain, to understand and to control a phenomenon which, if we fail to abolish it, might well abolish us”.

Classical antiquity has not been surpassed in the writing of military history. Few writers in the literature on war had greater powers of observation and annotation than Thucydides and Caesar, or even Xenophon and Herodotus, to name just a few. They provided meticulous reports on the objectives of commanders, the activities and capabilities of their armies, linking them to the inherent limitations of weapons and equipment, the motivation of their troops and the impact their activities had on society. Yet, despite great generals such as Alexander and Caesar, and great ancient military histories, these texts have not achieved the same excellence in timeless military theory.

In ancient China though, the great military philosopher Sun Tzu produced an influential treatise, *The Art of War* (circa 500 BC), in which he makes it clear that war is of “vital importance to the state … [to] life or death … survival or ruin. It is mandatory that it be thoroughly studied.” He placed much emphasis on strategy, the skill of commanding, the value of surprise and even popular guerrilla-type operations. A capable general had to be prudent, courageous but not foolhardy, confident not arrogant, strict without severity and be capable of taking initiative. He emphasised that being a general requires constant and personal intellectual exertion, in sum to be superior to those he commands. Sun Tzu provided a coherent and firm theoretical approach which reflects the sophisticated cultural achievements of the Chinese mandarins.

Carl von Clausewitz (whose *Vom Kriege* was first published in 1832) has endowed us with a valuable and unsurpassed theoretical framework for the study of war. Despite many other highly regarded contributions and the inconsistencies and gaps in his work, Clausewitz holds a prime position in military literature as his emphasis is on thinking about war and it is not a mechanical or technological approach to the complexities and discrepancies inherent to war and the application of military power. The purpose of theory, Clausewitz reminds us, is not to equip the mind with set formulas to solve problems, or to provide an illuminated path to success. Instead it is much more philosophical – it must “give the mind insight into the great mass of phenomena and of their relationships, and then leave it free to rise into the higher realms of action.” To prepare the individual is the task of theory, it “should educate the mind of the future leader in war … just as a sensible tutor forms and enlightens the opening mind of a youth without keeping him in strings all through his life.” Theory is not utilitarian, but should inform by way of concepts, facilitate understanding and provide a framework for analysis. It must primarily “clarify concepts and ideas that have become, as it were, confused and entangled.”

Clausewitz suggests a “thorough familiarity” with military history. The relationship between theory and military history is close, as history indicates how things occurred and theory provides tools for understanding and classification. If specific historic facts do not accord with theory, the facts should not be ignored – theory should rather be revised. Strategic thought and decision making in war are therefore dependent on knowledge, a clear understanding of war and insight, which can only be gained through study and a truly analytical approach.
The history and theory of war essentially convey one message, namely that war springs from an important purpose or supreme objective. What is this objective? It is essentially politics. War can not be divorced from it. If states or coalitions deploy armed forces without clear policy objectives, doom might be imminent. Why? It is necessary to aim the effort of the state apparatus, including, but not only, the armed forces. Any war or conflict must have a beginning and an end, and these will be clearly recognised if measured against the objectives. Such measurement will also assist states or coalitions in knowing if they have succeeded or failed. If the reasons why a war is fought and the ends to be achieved are clearly elucidated, it is easier for non-autocratic societies, or states sensitive to national and international opinion, to mobilise their population, the media, the opinion of supporting states or even international opinion.

War remains a terrible instrument. Clausewitz called it an “act of violence pushed to its utmost bounds”, therefore “a dreadful spectacle”. Generals are not victorious without “bloodshed” and as war is fearsome in nature, we should appreciate it for what it is and “not allow our swords to grow blunt by and by, through humanitarianism, until someone steps in with a sharp sword and cuts our arms off our body.”

By contrast Sun Tzu reminded us that “to subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill”, as is to “capture an enemy’s cities and overthrow his state without protracted operations”. Clausewitz is more direct, stating that some (he calls them “kind-hearted people”) might think an ingenious way to “disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed” exists and might be the true objective of the art of war, “pleasant as it sounds, it is a fallacy that must be exposed” as war is such a dangerous business that kindness might cause severe mistakes. The above might appear to be an incongruence, yet both accepted the need to ultimately resort to battle and that the most effective way to conduct war is to fight for as short a time as possible and win decisively. In the typical appreciation of Sun Tzu, emphasis is usually placed on the Confucian idealism that the use of force is the last resort and “to subdue the enemy’s army without battle” is best. Yet further reading of Sun Tzu has reference to the importance of “victory” as the “main object in war” and not delaying it through “prolonged operations” which will tap the “resources of the state”. Attacks must occur quickly, as “speed is the essence in war”. Sun Tzu even suggested “concentrating your forces against the enemy” and defeating him by anticipating his plans, which he describes “as the ability to attain one’s aim in an artful and ingenious manner”. His notion that swift action is essential in war clearly has to do with avoiding the danger of becoming embroiled in prolonged wars of attrition – indeed a timeless warning. Though Sun Tzu does not discuss the bloody realities of war, Clausewitz is more direct, stating that the “object of attack is victory”, while the destruction of the enemy’s army is “the key to his defeat” and must be the “dominant consideration”. Clausewitz never negates the importance of diplomacy, but states that if war is a clash between major interests “resolved by bloodshed”, then it is “the only way in which it differs from other conflicts”.

Clausewitz emphasised the need for a proper equilibrium to exist between the government, the general or the military, and the people – the trinitarian concept. The government is responsible for making policy and deciding on the objectives of war based on anticipated cost and benefits, the military must provide the capacity to plan and execute military operations, while the commitment and mobilisation of the people is crucial for sustaining any war effort. This “trinity” is crucial for achieving victory and its importance is in the fact that it is supposed
to replace emotion with reason as the “people” are guided by feelings, the “general” will act in accordance with his ability and the “government” will provide the political rationale.\(^\text{16}\)

Recently, as warfare has become more irregular or of a low-intensity, a classical appreciation of war in the idiom of Clausewitz has its limitations and much recent focus has fallen on Chinese classics, twentieth century theory on guerrilla warfare, revolutionary warfare and the like. Some theorists question the contemporary relevance of Clausewitz,\(^\text{17}\) claiming that his theories do not apply to early wars, pre-modern warfare in general and specifically not to contemporary low-intensity conflict. However, others maintain that a Clausewitzian analysis convincingly points out the relevance of the trinitarian concept even in antiquity and it is certainly present in the work of Mao Tse-tung, as well as in other theories on irregular warfare.

An appropriate example from Greek antiquity relevant to the trinitarian concept, is Pericles’ funeral oration (during the Peloponnesian War): Pericles placed emphasis on the contribution the soldiers who died (the military) had made towards securing the free and democratic life of the people. In his view, only the democratic Athenian system justified such sacrifices and a population living under a lesser political system would not have been so motivated.\(^\text{18}\) In other words: a society with individual freedoms that is sustained by its citizens’ willingness to fight and die for it. In Mao’s treatise on guerrilla warfare the Communist party, or the political authority, control the gun or the military force, while the military are the fish that hide in the friendly sea of the population. In fact the revolutionary movement must gain, maintain and secure (mobilise) wide support from the population.\(^\text{19}\)

Although Clausewitz did not pretend to address conflict within states, but rather between states, his theory does have some relevance for the former and contrary to Van Creveld’s view, the trinitarian concept is also applicable to confusing internal conflicts such as the Intifada, Lebanon and Somalia. Though such chaotic conditions often initially lack a political focus or authority, the political aspect usually develops, as the case of the Intifada shows. It was a spontaneous uprising that soon developed into an attempt to establish a Palestinian state, where its people would have their own political leaders and armed forces. In Lebanon and Somalia the lack of a strong central government authority led to the formation of various warrior groups with their own supporters, leaders and objectives.\(^\text{20}\)

Interpretations of Clausewitz cut across ideological and cultural divides and contrasting positions on the relevance of Clausewitz abound. Yet, his contribution remains integral to our efforts to debate, explain, explore and understand contemporary war, strategy, and armed violence. Prominent theorists such as Gray perceive Clausewitz as the pre-eminent theorist on war and strategy. Though the views of Clausewitz have withstood the test of time, they can not explain contemporary strategy and war in its entirety.\(^\text{21}\) Certainly, war is a continuation of policy, both in great wars and for those conducting revolutions. And, heed the warning: if military force is not applied in support of clear and legitimate political goals, there is no logical limit to its application.
SO, WHAT IS STRATEGY?

The use of force does not settle an argument or show who is right in any dispute, but may indicate whose will is going to prevail. This aspect has had a determining impact on the structure of states and the political and economic systems around us. As one of the most enduring lessons of war is that going to war requires clear and achievable aims, having the best “plan”, is therefore important.

The Greek term “strategy” pertains to the ability of the general and was in disuse for a long time before becoming part of military nomenclature in the West during the late eighteenth century. By the twentieth century it was inextricably linked to the political sphere, with the clear understanding (emanating from Clausewitz) that war is only the instrument and politics the guiding intelligence. By the Second World War strategy was generally accepted as “the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfil the ends of policy”.

After the Second World War, strategy became closely associated with defence policy making. The notion was that defence policies be wisely adapted to suit the strategic reality of a specific country or group of countries at a specific time best. But this must be a rational process that considers the threat scenario, available resources and the most cost-effective response the means available allows. As conducting wars concerns all spheres of human activity, strategy should utilise all available means: hard military power as well as diplomatic, psychological, propaganda and economic measures.

The aim of strategy remains achieving policy objectives, but the best use must be made of all resources available (also referred to as grand strategy). It is no longer the exclusive domain of the military and it is important to understand that war is a complex and comprehensive phenomenon that consumes immense civilian resources and energy. Strategy is likewise concerned with the relationship between war and cash. Though it might be a subdivision of policy, economic constraints severely influence policy as well as the planning and conduct of war. Sustaining a war or deploying armed forces therefore calls for more than just the mobilisation of military power; it could include the other power bases of the state and the whole nation if need be.

Strategy is not a single doctrine but a philosophy or a “method of thought” as Beaufre explains. Philosophy is important because it provides a guiding principle, while strategy is important as it provides the operational concept. To choose the best course of action requires a thorough understanding of events and situations. Every situation requires a specific strategy and it is necessary to work out the best course of action. A strategy that might be effective in a specific situation might be disastrous in others. If fundamental errors in political judgement and strategy are made, great operational skill and capability can not redeem the situation. Though policy forms strategy and strategic imperatives on the other hand guide policy, errors in both can result in disaster or defeat. This might even be the case for nations that are part of a successful coalition.

It is more important not to make strategic errors than not to make errors on the operational and tactical level. Operational and tactical errors can be addressed, but errors in policy and strategy are fundamental to what the state is about. Sometimes countries go to war with tactics alone – a military system based on false premises. In Indo-China the French lost; although their tactics were excellent, they were defeated by the strategy of their adversaries. Despite this experience, they repeated the same mistakes in Algeria – by not designing a strategy best suited
to the situation. So, ignorance of strategy has been a most fatal error as many examples illustrate. A state or coalition that at the outset of hostilities has no alternative than military force is in a bad situation and must either be militarily very strong or might have to accept the conditions enforced upon it.

Despite elaborate discussions on the matter, strategy is essentially concerned with the contribution military power, and other means, make towards achieving the ends of policy.

NOTES ON ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIC APPROACHES TO WAR

Precariousness of victory

Clausewitz defined strategy as using “the engagement for the purpose of the war”; the destruction of an enemy force was the objective and a decisive battle the best way to achieve it. If battles of attrition, coupled with loss of territory occur, these will sap an adversary’s will, cause exhaustion or even “psychological disarming”, which will make the adversary realise that victory might be too costly or unlikely. Despite his emphasis on the battle, Clausewitz acknowledged that though the “centre of gravity” usually lies in the army, it might not always be the case: it could be a major city, public opinion, or, in coalitions, the strongest or most persistent ally. Yet, it is crucial to identify the “centre of gravity” and direct the military push at it.27

How to achieve a decisive and quick battlefield victory? Given that all things are equal, overwhelming numerical superiority is the simplest way to battlefield success. The best strategy, Clausewitz declares, is “always to be very strong: first in general and then at the decisive point”.28 Through manoeuvre one must come to grips with an enemy with as much strength as possible – not simply numerical advantage, but superiority at the decisive point. Simple numerical advantage might not ensure victory, specifically on the strategic level where no contact is made and numerically inferior armies with good leadership can achieve success by adhering to the mentioned concept. The Swiss military theorist Jomini came to the same conclusion, likening the art of war to bringing into action the greatest possible force at the decisive point.29

Quite interestingly, and despite the emphasis on the battle and the destruction of the enemy army, in strategic terms Clausewitz saw defence as the stronger means. Because attack is morally important, soldiers have embraced it as a natural first step in war. Clausewitz warned that it might be better to initially wait. If an enemy advances he might exhaust himself and his men. By advancing, his communications lengthen, while a defender’s communications become shorter and he retreats onto prepared positions. Eventually the attack will exhaust itself and reach the “culminating point” of attack or victory. Initially it might therefore seem that the defender is losing, but in the long term the balance will swing to him.30 Clausewitz had actual experience during Napoleon’s invasion of Russia in 1812. As the Russians gave ground, they destroyed everything the French might require to survive. Napoleon’s victory at Borodino (outside Moscow) did not result in turning the tide of the campaign. His army was then forced to march back along the same route in the bitter winter, while being constantly attacked on the flanks and in the rear. The attack has therefore past the “culminating point” of victory and as the defender’s strength is concentrated, he counterattacks.
Before the outbreak of the First World War strategists had considered how to achieve a quick victory in a next war. The offensive was seen as the best way to guarantee success. As the German General Staff searched for a rapid decision in war, they studied great battles of encirclement. They were planning for war in virtual isolation as they ignored the contribution of diplomacy in settling disputes and philosophical questions concerning the objectives of the state. The notion of a grand strategy, considering political, economic, diplomatic, psychological and other components of state power were ignored, and the emphasis fell on the weapons and management tools necessary to mobilise and fight great armies.

Germany had to prepare for a war on two fronts – to face France and Russia simultaneously. German strategy, devised by the Chief of the General Staff Count Schlieffen, rested on the premise that a war must be short, a knockout blow, as Germany could economically not afford a protracted war of attrition that would also raise the prospect of domestic social and political unrest. The question was on which enemy to concentrate first? Schlieffen preferred France, as it would mobilise more rapidly than Russia, pose a growing threat if not quickly dealt with, while geographically (compared to Russia) France would be easier to defeat. Schlieffen was aware that new technological developments (mines, magazine rifles, more powerful artillery and explosives) favoured the defensive, but concluded that the offensive had to depend on flank movements, envelopments and encirclement.

The plan was to outflank France by wheeling through Belgium in a great movement with the weight on the German right wing (west), to then envelop Paris and push the French against the border in the south-east. The plan was politically naïve, violated Belgium neutrality and would bring Britain into the war on the continent. When the Schlieffen plan was executed (in 1914, after his retirement), the left wing (east) was strengthened, while the army on the extreme right had to cover three hundred miles in a great wheel and sustain an incredible marching rate of roughly 24 kilometres (15 miles) a day for three weeks – practically and logistically difficult to execute. Not taking cognisance of Clausewitz’ notion that the force of the attack would diminish, the right flank was just not strong or large enough, and the grand wheel around Paris could not occur. As the force and momentum were not maintained, the German offensive ground to a halt at the Marne (to the east of Paris) within a month. In essence disequilibrium existed between the objectives of strategy and capacity – the offensive was just too great and was bound to lose its momentum.

As the war of movement ended and a stalemate developed on the Western Front, it became a great struggle of attrition or a Materialschlachten. The art of generalship degenerated as a continuous trench system on the Western Front developed and the belligerents sought to break the stalemate on tactical and strategic level with large armies. It developed into a war of attrition noted for concentrated firepower and massed artillery bombardments, terrible destruction and high casualties, with offensive after offensive achieving very little. By the end of 1915 the Chief of the German General Staff, Falkenhayn, proposed a sharpening of the attrition struggle. At sea this would involve an indirect blow with U-boats to deny the British their crucial overseas supplies, while on land they would attempt to “bleed France white”. The fortified salient of Verdun was the objective as France “would throw in every man they have.” The capture of Verdun was immaterial to Falkenhayn – the real attack was aimed at French morale by “bleeding” the French army. Verdun would suck them into the mincing machine, or the mill of the Meuse.
In Reflections on War, the editors and contributing authors succeeded in covering a broad range of issues in the discourse on war and conflict. The study investigates the crucial links between theory, strategy and objectives in war, and indicates the relevance of theory for understanding and explaining the timeless and constant phenomenon of war. Special attention is drawn to when and how not to go to war.

While the broad spectrum of chapters reflects the realist paradigm, they also clearly point out the dangers and moral dilemmas of going to war, showing an awareness of the moral issues and complications of mass-armed conflict.

This comprehensive work deftly draws a multitude of insights together from international legal theory, management sciences, military history, sociology, international political economy and international politics, as well as the political economy of war.

The book is meant for scholars and military experts; experienced and reflective military practitioners will benefit from the work.

Veronica Usacheva, PhD
Senior Research Fellow, Institute for African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow