

Metaphors of War in the 21st Century

From Duel to Street Brawl and its Implications for Strategy

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War has always been understood as an essentially two-sided affair. Clausewitz characterised war as a duel, using the analogy of wrestlers trying to pin each other down. Whether as duel or as a wrestling match, either analogy that Clausewitz used nevertheless still envisaged war as a two-sided affair.¹

This image of war as a two-sided affair—whether as a duel or as a wrestling match—does not mean that wars have only two contending armed forces, or states for that matter. In the era of 21st Century nation-states, it also means that other “interested parties” can become embroiled in the conflict. While this may seem counter-intuitive, the reason for this lies in the very malleability that lies at the heart of the ‘nation’.

The nation is, as Benedict Anderson put it, an “imagined community”.² Anderson later argues that this “imagined community” is amenable to manipulation by policy makers, and can incorporate “illiterates and populations with different mother-tongues” and that “nations can now be imagined without linguistic communality ... out of a general awareness of what modern history has demonstrated to be possible.”³ What strategic actors such as ISIS have managed to do is to create, in the words of Joel Kotkin, “an intrinsic ‘tribal’ sense of a unique historical and ethnic identity”.⁴

The wars in Afghanistan, in the 1980s (when the former Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, occupied it and subsequently imposed a puppet political regime in Kabul), and more recently when the United States and its coalition partners invaded Afghanistan to topple the Taliban and subsequently installed the Karzai regime. The war in Iraq, when the United States led a coalition into Iraq to topple the Saddam Hussein regime. The current civil war in Syria, and how it has morphed into a regional conflict, with a new strategic actor called ISIS/ISIL.

What connects these various conflicts or “wars” is that they started with a particular set of combating parties, but somehow the number of combating parties appears to grow eventually. So what may have started out as a duel – to use Clausewitz’s image – eventually transformed into something more

¹ Carl von Clausewitz (translated and edited by Bernard Brodie and Peter Paret), *On War* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 75.

² Benedict Richard O’Gorman Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), p. 7.

³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 135.

⁴ Joel Kotkin, *Tribes: How Race, Religion, and Identity Determine Success in the New Global Economy* (New York: Random House, 1992), p. 16.

akin to a street brawl. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, and eventually ended facing two main opposing forces – the Peshawar Seven and the Tehran Eight – who received backing from Pakistan and China in the first instance and Iran in the second. By the time the United States-led coalition invaded Afghanistan, new schisms had emerged, between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. The United States and its coalition partners invaded Iraq in 2003, quickly disintegrated the Saddam Hussein regime and the Iraqi Armed Forces, but soon faced a domestic insurgency that appeared resisting the Coalition until Iraqi “honour” could be retrieved; nevertheless, this eventually transformed into any number of smaller splinter groups, sometimes fighting the Coalition, often fighting each other. How many non-Afghans and non-Iraqis moved to both conflict zones to fight their respective causes, who knows!!!

How did this state of affairs emerge? Why is it so easy for an existing conflict to transform into something else, with multiple combating parties emerging apparently out of nowhere?

The answer lies in the ubiquity of communications devices and platforms, which allow information to be broadcasted almost instantaneously. There were reportedly over 3 billion Internet users in 2014.⁵ This represents an exponential increase of 741% of Internet users from 2000 and 2014.⁶ It is this ubiquity of access to information that allows for people otherwise widely dispersed and physically unconnected to an existing armed conflict to now feel connected, to want to ‘do something’ about this conflict. It is the war version of the flash mob. Even in the 1980s, at the height of the Soviet Union’s war in Afghanistan and long before ubiquitous communications, we saw Muslims from around making their respective journeys to Afghanistan to join the Mujahideen. ISIS today has amongst its ranks any number of people from outside the region, who have been inspired to join ISIS in their war.

This, therefore, has implications for how defence planners ought to understand the nature and character of strategy. Clausewitz reminds us that war is fundamentally purposive in nature.⁷ Furthermore, war is “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.”⁸ It is an inherently dynamic process, one that involves the “collision of two living forces.”⁹ If war is a clash of wills, it is possible to deduce the real ‘battlefield’ to always be the opponent’s will. At the strategic level, will is manifested typically in the political leadership and/or the hearts and minds of the population of the sides involved, and their respective willingness to endure the otherwise unendurable.

At the operational and tactical levels, it is a matter of breaking the morale of the opposing troops.

⁵ <http://time.com/3604911/3-billion-internet-users/>, accessed 2 April 2015.

⁶ <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>, accessed 2 April 2015.

⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 86-87.

⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 75.

⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p.77.

It is at the operational level that the phenomenon being investigated here—the so-called strategic flash mob—where success can be increasingly problematic. However one defines and understands the nuts and bolts of strategy, it is clear that strategy is focused on the adversary, and only the adversary; strategy does not have to take into consideration any other actors, because of the two-sided nature of war. The objective of strategy is to defeat the enemy; the objective in war is to be able to convince the enemy that the political cause for which he fights is not attainable. But increasingly, strategists need to ask, “Who is the enemy?” Similarly, strategists need to ask, “What is the political purpose for which my enemy fights?”