

The Nature of Strategy Versus the Character of War Lukas Milevski

Strategy and defense policy and security or war studies

Much of the literature in strategic studies since the end of the Cold War has argued that the world is entering an era of new types of conflict. War has transformed; we are experiencing new wars; we are facing fourth- (or later) generation warfare; war occurs amongst the people; major war is obsolete; and so on.¹ In sum, war is not what it once was. Wars are no longer straightforward, conventional affairs where winning and losing are clear conditions and the path to each is immediately apparent to the practicing strategist. Russia's publicly ambiguous intervention into Ukraine in 2014-15 is sure to generate further literature on yet another change in the character of war. The character, sometimes even the *nature*, of war has become an important topic.

Yet the topic is not without controversy. Many strategists who adhere to the canonical texts find that much of the literature on new wars frequently lacks historical perspective. Another argument against the literature propounding new wars is that much, if not all, of it is based upon an inaccurate reading of Clausewitz's *On War*, the premier classical strategic text—particularly of his remarkable trinity which describes the nature of war. Instead, past wars or strategic thought are now often depicted through caricature rather than history to reinforce the novelty of the present.

Neither side of the debate appears to have considered the actual source of the character of war. Even Clausewitz stated that “every age had its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions, and its own peculiar preconceptions. Each period, therefore, would have held to its own theory of war.”² Yet Clausewitz says little on the origins of these differences and strategic studies seems to approach the idea of the ‘character of war’ in a fatalistic manner, as if it were a fait accompli engineered by the enemy of the day about which nothing can be done. Such thinking is at odds with the very concept of strategy itself, which emphasizes choice and agency.

The primary source of the character of any war is strategy. Strategy embodies two intertwined relationships—that between military power and (desired) political consequences; and that between interacting adversaries as they decide how to connect power and consequence in a manner favorable to themselves. Between them these two relationships determine a major part of the character of any particular war.

The first relationship was encapsulated in Clausewitz's best known quote on the responsibilities of the strategist and the character of war. “The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish...the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.”³ That is, why is the use of

¹ Martin van Creveld. *The Transformation of War*. (New York: The Free Press 1991); Mary Kaldor. *New & Old Wars*. (Cambridge: Polity 2006); T.X. Hammes. *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century*. (St Paul: Zenith Press 2006); Rupert Smith. *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*. (London: Penguin Books 2006); John Mueller. *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War*. (New York: Basic Books 1990).

² Carl von Clausewitz. *On War*. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. and trans. (Princeton: Princeton UP 1984), 593.

³ *Ibid*, 88.

force in war likely to achieve the political consequences desired by the politicians, and what should that use of force look like to achieve the best effect? How force is used is one of the major contributing factors to forming the character of any war. The choice of tactics, and the manner of their productive connection to one's political ambitions is an immediate and elemental influence on the character of any war.

This relatively unilateral judgment of strategists is necessarily constantly modified in the interactive and adversarial arena of war, where the enemy has a vote and is willing to use it. Both sides must adapt to the other's strategies, actions, and the resulting consequences, in a process which ends only when the war does. Strategists on opposing sides therefore exercise power over the character of the war. Whoever takes the initiative and gains control has the greater ability to influence the character of the war to his advantage.

The character of the war is never static, because the strategies of the opposing belligerents are never inert. The character of any war may thus be as (un)predictable as strategy itself. An excellent example of why considering 'the character of war' apart from its sources is meaningless is the Vietnam War. One side in the great historiographical debate sees the war purely as a pacification/counterinsurgency war for hearts and minds, the other side as a war where big battalions were in fact necessary. In reality, the North Vietnamese and their Vietcong allies had greater control over the character of the war than the United States and South Vietnam, and shifted between larger and smaller operations as necessary for best effect and in reaction to their opponents' tactics and strategies.

The future is inherently unknowable. The character of war for 'an age' is defined through ongoing adversarial strategic action, and cannot be known at the onset of that age—although it may be anticipated. Political prudence may preclude pursuing certain characters of war altogether. Afghanistan became the war we have known because of the combined political imprudence of suddenly turning to an ill-advised adventure in Iraq, and transforming the mission in Afghanistan from one of eradicating a terrorist network to a nation-building endeavor. The West's own policies sowed the conditions for 'an age' defined by insurgency and counterinsurgency, which was inimical to its own strategic competence.

Does 'the character of war' have any analytical value as a concept, if it is so malleable and in fact hostage to the policies and strategies of the active belligerents? It likely does not for the actual practice of strategy, as it is the result of strategic practice rather than being its enabler, partner, or other. An unfavorable character of war is merely another way of saying that one is not practicing strategy well enough compared to the enemy. The concept does have some value for defense planners, who only plan hypothetical scenarios and cannot anticipate the details of potential opposing strategies in advance. In this case, the character of war may be a useful shorthand for anticipating strategic interaction for planning purposes. It may also have some use to historians studying the past, the better to identify continuity and change and perhaps even to generalize from the evidence. For the historian the character of war is also a useful shorthand for summarizing past strategic interaction for educational purposes. But for the strategist practicing his craft in the heat of the adversarial moment, the emphasis must be upon the present enemy and upon interacting strategies rather than the character of the war.