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CLAUSEWITZ AT ARMAGEDDON
A 19th Century Perspective On Nuclear Risk Reduction

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Introduction

Colin Powell describes the writings of Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz as "like a beam of light from the past, still illuminating present-day military quandaries."¹ The frequency with which modern commentators quote von Clausewitz suggests that General Powell is not alone in his assessment. Two factors have helped von Clausewitz's writings to withstand the test of time. First, he approached the study of war from a broad, theoretical perspective, giving emphasis to motivational factors and other fundamental themes that operate across the full spectrum of human conflict. And second, while the stunning rate of technological advance since the early 19th century has changed the shape and size of the battlefield, technological advances have, with possibly one significant exception, left the fundamental nature of war and human conflict unchanged. That exception, the development of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD), has for the first time given military and political leaders the capacity to bring about the annihilation of their enemy through execution of a single decision. This paper reexamines some of von Clausewitz's observations about the nature of war and human conflict in light of the development of nuclear weapons and asks two questions: to what extent are von Clausewitz's insights still valid, and, if they are still valid, how are they, or might they be, reflected in efforts to reduce the risk of nuclear war between two nuclear powers?

Tendency Toward Absolute War Moderated By Factors and Forces

"War is an act of force, and there is no logical limit to the application of that force. Each side, therefore, compels its opponent to follow suit, a reciprocal action is started which must lead, *in theory*, to extremes" (emphasis added)²

¹ Powell, Colin, with Joseph E. Persico. *My American Journey*. New York: Random House, 1995. 207

² von Clausewitz, Carl. *On War*. Ed and Trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989. 77

One of von Clausewitz's most important insights was to recognize that while war in its abstract, theoretically "ideal" state will escalate to become total or absolute war, this is unlikely to occur in the real world because of the "vast array of factors, forces, and conditions in national affairs that are affected by war," and which moderate war's tendency toward its extreme state³ Examination of these moderating factors and forces makes up a large part of von Clausewitz's most relevant work Tanks, cruise missiles, fighter aircraft, stealth technology and other technological advances have expanded the modern battlefield, given it a third dimension, and at times altered the balance between offense and defense, but they have not significantly changed the factors von Clausewitz identified as serving to moderate war's tendency toward the extreme It is not clear, however, that the same can be said for the development of nuclear weapons

Absolute War Is Now Possible

While von Clausewitz made a strong case against the likelihood of war progressing to its "ideal" state, he did not rule out this possibility and suggested three conditions under which absolute war might occur in the real world "(a) if war were a wholly isolated act, occurring suddenly and not produced by previous events in the political world, (b) it consisted of a single decisive act or set of simultaneous ones, (c) the decision achieved was complete and perfect in itself, uninfluenced by any previous estimate of the political situation it would bring about"⁴ It can be argued that this is a fairly good formulation of the major concerns facing disarmament experts in the nuclear age Rephrased in today's language it might read A nuclear holocaust is most likely if a) there is an accidental or uncontrolled use of nuclear weapons, b) there is a

³ von Clausewitz 579

⁴ von Clausewitz 78

preemptive first strike or c) there is a willingness to use nuclear weapons, despite the likelihood of mutual assured destruction (MAD)

The fact that the conditions von Clausewitz described as making absolute war possible in the real world are more likely to occur since the development of nuclear weapons is certainly not a novel insight. By itself it brings us no clearer understanding of the problems we face in the nuclear age. It is instructive, however, to examine the extent to which von Clausewitz's "limiting factors" still apply in an environment where absolute war is a real possibility, and how an understanding of these factors can be used to reduce the risks posed by nuclear weapons.

War is Never an Isolated Act

The first moderating force von Clausewitz identifies is that "war never breaks out wholly unexpectedly, nor can it spread instantaneously." War's tendency to the extreme is moderated as each side evaluates the actions, words, and, most importantly, the will of the other as a situation develops.⁵ The possibility that nuclear weapons, with their ability instantaneously to cause mass casualties, may be used either accidentally or as the result of a misunderstanding, means there is now a real danger of creating conditions in which this moderating force would not operate. **Any strategy of risk reduction should seek to restore the operability of this moderating force, and have as an important priority measures aimed at reducing the possibility of accidental or mistaken use of nuclear weapons.** In practice, this has been done through complex safety procedures and codes controlling the use of nuclear weapons. Both the United States and the Soviet Union formally committed themselves to maintaining and improving measures to guard against the accidental or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons in an agreement signed during the

SALT I negotiations⁶ There has also been a consistent effort to increase the transparency of nuclear relations between the US and USSR through agreements such as that which created the "Hot Line"⁷

War Does Not Consist of a Single Short Blow

Von Clausewitz believed that war would tend toward totality if it consisted of a single decisive act or set of simultaneous decisions, but recognized that the nature of the resources available for war at the time did not permit their simultaneous employment. He argued that if war was made up of several successive acts or decisions, each such act or decision would serve as a gauge for acts or decisions to follow. If one side chose not to use all the force at its disposal at any particular stage this would serve as a reason for the other side also to reduce its effort, thereby tending to moderate the tendency toward total war.⁸

In a case involving escalation from a conventional war across the nuclear threshold, Clausewitz's observation would still hold. The advent of nuclear weapons, however, has made the simultaneous deployment of sufficient resources to annihilate the enemy in a single blow a very real possibility. This reality (together with concerns about deterrence and the ability to defend against nuclear attack which are discussed below) has led many strategists to consider pre-emptive first strikes as one of the most likely ways to survive a nuclear exchange. **A risk reduction strategy should, therefore, attempt to reduce the likelihood of a successful preemptive strike. Von Clausewitz's writings suggest that one way to approach this goal is to increase the number of acts or decisions that are required as a conflict develops. In**

⁶ United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency Arms Control and Disarmament Agreements Agreement on Measures to Reduce the Risk of Outbreak of Nuclear War Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Sept 30, 1971 Washington, 1990

⁷ USACDA 31

⁸ von Clausewitz 79-80

practice, attempts have been made to achieve this through a commitment to consult and through increased transparency and notification requirements. In 1973 President Nixon and General Secretary Brezhnev signed an agreement committing the US and USSR to consult urgently whenever there appeared to be an increased risk of nuclear war.⁹ The CSCE treaty on confidence-building and disarmament measures in Europe helps reduce the risk of nuclear war by requiring advance notifications and inspections of significant military activities.¹⁰ While this treaty contemplates notification and inspection of conventional military activities, it is reasonable to assume that some form of increased conventional military activity would precede an intentional decision to resort to nuclear weapons. Notification of, or for that matter, failure to notify, an opponent of conventional military actions under the CSCE treaty would serve as advance warning of possible hostile intent and by increasing the number of decision or action points in a possible escalation reduce the risk of a pre-emptive strike. Nuclear risk reduction centers established following a 1987 agreement also provide an opportunity for each party to "gauge" the other in times of increasing tension.¹¹

The Importance of Defense Is Deterrence

Von Clausewitz theorizes that in an "ideal" state military action in war should continue without pause until a decision is reached. He bases his analysis on a principle of polarity. This theoretical construct suggests that where the interests of one side are exactly opposed to the interest of the other a genuine polarity will exist and there will be no reason to suspend military

⁹ USACDA Agreement Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Prevention of Nuclear War, 1973

¹⁰ USACDA Document of the Stockholm Conference on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures and Disarmament in Europe Convened in Accordance with the Relevant Provisions of the Concluding Document of the Madrid Meeting of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, 1986

¹¹ USACDA Agreement Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Establishment of Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers, 1987

action until one side attains its objective. In reality, however, military action is frequently suspended. Von Clausewitz explains that one reason for this is that the superiority of defense over attack destroys the effect of the principle of polarity. The weaker the motive for action, the more it will be neutralized by the strength of defense. Put another way, a strong defense can deter aggressive action.¹² **A risk reduction strategy should reduce the incentive for offensive use of nuclear weapons through the promotion of a strong defense.**

A true defense against the use of nuclear weapons has not yet been developed, nevertheless, the recognition that maintaining the proper balance between offense and defense is an important element in suspending military action plays a large role in risk reduction thinking today. In the nuclear age, defense might best be defined as the ability to protect nuclear assets from destruction in a first strike so as to preserve the option of a large enough retaliatory strike to deter action by the other side. As early as 1959 Bernard Brodie recognized that "stability is achieved when each nation believes that the strategic advantage of striking first is overshadowed by the tremendous cost of doing so."¹³ This nuclear age definition of defense, when combined with the apparent willingness of the world's two major nuclear powers to continue spending indefinitely on offensive weapons, led to an arms control strategy aimed at locking-in the existing "stable" balance between offensive and defensive weapons. Paradoxically, part of this strategy involved limiting the deployment of antiballistic missile defenses. The reasoning, in part, was that the creation of missile defenses would in fact be an aggressive act because such "defensive systems" would raise the chances of success for an offensive first strike. This is

¹² von Clausewitz 84

¹³ Brodie, Bernard, Strategy in the Missile Age (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955) 303

perhaps a somewhat convoluted argument, but in a MAD world it seems consistent with von Clausewitz's insights into the moderating effect of the relationship between offense and defense

Fog of War

Von Clausewitz identified a commander's imperfect knowledge of the situation as another factor tending to suspend military action, thereby moderating the tendency of war toward the extreme. A commander can only know his opponent's situation from imperfect intelligence, and in keeping with human nature, is always inclined to over-estimate the strength of his enemy. This over-estimation of an opponent's strength is likely, according to von Clausewitz, to lead to inaction.¹⁴

In the nuclear age it seems clear that over-estimation of an opponent's strength remains a very great inducement not to initiate a nuclear action. **To be consistent in our use of Clausewitzian factors to develop a nuclear risk reduction strategy we would want intentionally to increase a commander's uncertainty of his opponent's strength in order to reduce the likelihood of his taking action.** In the abstract this is still a valid objective, but in a real-world nuclear environment the potential cost of under-estimating an opponent's strength is so great as to make the moderating value of increasing a commander's over-estimation of his opponent's strength of little practical value. Instead, it is clear that a commander's imperfect knowledge of the situation he faces can only serve to increase the risk of accidental or mistaken use of nuclear weapons. **Therefore, our efforts should, and have been, aimed at reducing uncertainty and fog, not promoting it.** This has been a recurrent theme of nuclear

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von Clausewitz 84-85

disarmament agreements, starting with the "Hot Line" agreement in 1963 and continuing through the ballistic missile launch agreement of 1988¹⁵

The Role of the Political Objective

Von Clausewitz was the first to describe war as merely a continuation of policy by other means. He noted the relationship between military and political objectives, pointing out that "generally speaking, a military objective that matches the political object in scale will, if the latter is reduced, be reduced in proportion, this will be all the more so as the political object increases in predominance"¹⁶. This relationship between military and political objectives is one of the factors that allows for wars of varied intensity. Von Clausewitz also points out that the more powerful and inspiring the motives for a war are, the closer war will approach its abstract "ideal" state, and the more closely the military and political objectives will coincide. From this von Clausewitz concludes that the supreme judgment that a statesman or commander must make is to establish the kind of war on which they are embarking, and neither mistake it for, nor try to turn it into something that is alien to its nature¹⁷.

To fully understand what implications von Clausewitz's "prime directive" might have for nuclear strategists, it is necessary first to consider what rational political objectives one might establish when contemplating nuclear war. The effects of radiation and the near impossibility of controlling or limiting the awesome destructive power of nuclear weapons in a two-sided conflict make it difficult to justify their employment to achieve almost any "positive" political objective. The resort to nuclear weapons (when both sides have such weapons) is unlikely to achieve objectives such as conquering an enemy's territory or furthering one's own political or

¹⁵ USACDA 318-455

¹⁶ von Clausewitz 81

¹⁷ von Clausewitz 87-88

economic security. While nuclear weapons can certainly be used to break the will of an enemy, it is doubtful a nuclear exchange would leave one's enemy with the capacity to do one's will in any meaningful sense. The only rational objective for the actual employment of nuclear weapons would seem to be as a last resort defense of one's national interest (and even this use is open to attack by those who question the logic of risking destruction of the planet in an effort to retain a national identity and freedom of choice.) **Nuclear risk reduction is best served if statesmen and commanders clearly understand that nuclear weapons can only effectively serve rational political objectives when viewed and treated solely as defensive weapons.** Although this has not been a consistent theme throughout the development of nuclear risk reduction strategy, a recognition of this principle on the part of both the US and USSR can be inferred from the sharp reductions in nuclear weapons that began with the signing of the INF treaty¹⁸

Conclusion

This has been a limited look at the implications of von Clausewitz's writings for contemporary nuclear risk reduction strategists. It has focused only on potential conflicts where both parties would possess significant nuclear arsenals.

There appears to be ample justification for the conclusion that von Clausewitz's **insights** retain their usefulness for strategists, even in a nuclear environment. However, the unique nature of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, which is characterized by both the scope of the weapons' destructive power and the ability they give commanders to prosecute a war through the execution of a single decision, may require another look at some of von Clausewitz's **conclusions**. Some conclusions, such as the moderating role of a commander's uncertainty about

the situation he faces, may lose their validity as the means to wage war approach the conditions von Clausewitz identified as necessary for absolute war to exist in reality. This does not diminish, however, the importance of von Clausewitz's work. The true value of his observations lies not so much in his final conclusions, as in his ability to correctly identify the forces at play and his invaluable insights into the relationship between these forces and factors across the whole spectrum of possible human conflict.