

Simons G.

Understanding Political and Intangible Elements in Modern Wars

Introduction

Organised warfare has been waged by man for many centuries, some certain factors/elements of this pursuit have remained actual in spite of the advancement of technology and the scale of destruction that is wrecked upon societies that are affected. There are two sides to war, the tangible and the intangible. The tangible elements are those physical components that can be seen, touched, felt and heard – soldiers, weapons, the terrain and weather for example. Those intangible elements may not be seen or heard, but they exert an impact upon the outcome of a war. Among the intangible, one can list politics, information, reputation, morale and perception.

When the public reads about war in newspapers or on the internet, hears it on the radio or watches it on TV, there is an overwhelming tendency by journalism and mass media to be very descriptive about the conflict that they are covering. It touches the surface, you see and hear the sights, sounds and horrors of war. Yet, the public may actually fail to understand how and why a war occurs in the first instance as it is void of analytical context. Given the rise in the usage of humanitarianism as an excuse to justify military action, there is a critical need to understand the intangible factors that influence the political environment and leading to, and the manner in which wars are fought.

This paper shall examine a number of different intangible factors that shape why and how wars are currently fought. A historical understanding and conceptualisation of wars shall be established through a brief introduction to a limited number of key historical treatises on the subject, namely Sun Tzu and *Art of War*, Niccolo Machiavelli and *The Art of War*, and Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*. How do these influential volumes rate in terms of their relevance to today's contemporary world? As shall be shown, in some instances, and relating to intangible elements they are still very relevant and generate some further understanding.

In the age of New Communication Technology and instantaneous global communication, information can be viewed by various actors simultaneously as being a threat and an opportunity. A threat owing to the potential to damage the intangible assets of an actor, especially those political factors related to legitimacy and credibility. But it is also an opportunity for the same reasons, it can be wielded against an opponent's intangible assets in order to weaken and/or isolate them. The last section deals with the actual targeting of the tangible and intangible assets. This shows the potential that can be harnessed through waging

war not only in the traditional spheres of land, sea and air, but also into the information space.

Historical Framing of the Elements and Pursuit of War

From a historical point of view, there has been an age old interest in the philosophical and theoretical aspects and components of war. The study and development of these points tends to be aimed at bettering the prosecution of war by turning it into an object of study or a form of art. This has been carried out through the ages, since organised forms of warfare have been waged by man. This section shall look briefly at three influential authors, Sun Tzu, Carl von Clausewitz and Niccolo Machiavelli, with regard to their views on the role of the politics and intangible elements in influencing warfare.

Sun Tzu was an influential Chinese general and tactician, born in the 6th Century BC in China, he has greatly influenced East Asia, and continues to influence Western thought on the topic of war. According to Sun Tzu “warfare is the greatest affair of state, the basis of life and death, the Tao to survival or extinction. It must be thoroughly pondered and analysed”¹. He broke down the structure of warfare into five different components in order to allow for a comparative evaluation on the basis of estimations. The five factors or components are:

- 1) The Tao – influences peoples’ relationship to their leader, for instance their willingness to die for them (or not), not to fear danger;
- 2) Heaven – includes the yin and yang, cold and heat. Constraints based upon the seasons of the year;
- 3) Earth – refers to the nature of the distances and terrain, far or near, difficult or easy;
- 4) General – the possession of knowledge, discipline, credibility, benevolence and courage;
- 5) Laws for military organisation and discipline – involves organisation and regulations, the Tao of command and the management of logistics².

What is proposed by Sun Tzu is a mix of tangible and intangible elements that need to be not only known, but understood by the Commander in order to be successful on the battlefield. The tangible factors are Heaven, Earth and some elements of the Laws for military organisation and discipline. Intangible elements include the Tao, General and parts of the Laws for military organisation and discipline. These all touch on the issues of motivation, perception, persuasion and influence, which cannot be physically felt, yet still exert an effect upon the outcome of warfare. Not the least of which is the ability to motivate the military and

¹*Sun Tzu*. Art of War. Philadelphia, 2003. P. 10.

²*Sun Tzu*. Art of War. Philadelphia, 2003. Pp. 10–12.

the population to trust, follow and fight for the political and military leadership.

One of the key instruments of warfare, according to Sun Tzu, was the application of deception and disinformation. “Warfare is the Tao of deception.” Various deceptive ploys were suggested, such as to feign incapability, “when committed to employing your forces, feign inactivity”, creating an illusion as to the location of an objective and other ploys.³ Thus the point of being able to deceive the enemy in order to gain advantage on the battlefield is recognised as being a critical asset in creating an advantage against the enemy. The key to this is the ability to fool the senses of the enemy so that they make a mistake or miscalculation based upon what they think they see or hear, rather than on what actually exists. This is therefore an ‘attack’ on the enemy’s decision-making process and capability, but does not exclude such methods being used upon a domestic civil population.

Niccolo Machiavelli was born in 1469, living in Florence during the Renaissance period, and is considered the father of modern political science. During 1519–20 he wrote the work *The Art of War*. He stressed that war must be clearly defined, and developed the philosophy of ‘limited warfare’ that occurs when traditional diplomacy fails and war becomes an extension of politics (Sun Tzu also warned of the dangers of protracted warfare, which he said, no one profited from). A number of basic relationships between politics and war were enumerated by Machiavelli:

- 1) Military power is the foundation of civil society;
- 2) A well-ordered military establishment is an essential unifying element in civil society;
- 3) A policy of military aggrandizement contributes to the stability and longevity of civil society;
- 4) The military art and political art possess a common style;
- 5) A military establishment tends to reflect the qualities of the civil society of which it is a part⁴.

According to Machiavelli, politics and the military possessed a number of similarities, and that a strong statesman must also be a capable general⁵. He referred to politics and the military as being creative arts, “moulding raw human material into the desired form, as well as the necessary personal qualities for successful leadership (spirit, creative energy, personal resolve and will power ... etc.) in difficult and trying environments⁶. This is

³*Sun Tzu*. Art of War. Philadelphia, 2003. Pp. 14–15.

⁴*Machiavelli N.* The Art of War. Cambridge (MA), 1965. P. xlvii.

⁵*Machiavelli N.* The Art of War. Cambridge (MA), 1965. P. liii.

⁶*Machiavelli N.* The Art of War. Cambridge (MA), 1965. P. liv.

in keeping with Sun Tzu's fourth factor, which relates to the personal qualities of the general.

When it comes to the issue of deception, there is agreement with many that the use of deception and trickery against an enemy is completely justifiable. However, when it comes to fellow citizens and allies, Machiavelli does not characterise them as being a homogenous and loyal mass, but rather a collection of different interest that can either more or less coincide with the leadership's. Therefore, he sees no moral dilemma in deceive or tricking fellow citizens and allies in order to create a sense of unity that permit the leadership to pursue its objectives⁷. This can certainly be observed in the contemporary context, such as the use of the pretext of the presence weapons of mass destruction and links to terrorism as a means to initiate a seemingly legitimate war against Iraq, the deception went as far as the former Secretary of State, Colin Powell, presenting the 'irrefutable' evidence before the United Nations.

Born in 1780 in Prussia and a veteran of the Napoleonic Wars, although a soldier he was at times more characterised as a philosopher. Von Clausewitz was very concise in his characterisation of the nature and purpose of the pursuit of war. He defined war as "an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will"⁸. The fulfilment of 'our will' therefore seems to be the spark that initiates the process that leads to war. What is the factor that decides what 'our will' is to be? This is tied to the influence and issues that are guided formed by politics. "Thus, therefore, the political object, as the original motive of the War, will be the standard for determining both the aim of the military force and also the amount of effort to be made"⁹. This can be seen in various modern international military interventions, such as the low level of interest and commitment in such conflicts Rwanda and Darfur. And conversely the high level of interest and commitment in Iraq and currently Syria, where the objective is certainly a matter of imposing one's political will and influence over the targeted country.

The use of war can be the avenue to either a means or an end, in answer to the political objective at hand. For instance, the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq was stated as being pursuant of the political end by the Bush administration. That is, to rid the United States of the supposed security threat of weapons of mass destruction and links to terrorism in Saddam Hussein's Iraq. However, it seems, with hindsight that the true purpose of the invasion and subsequent occupation of the country was a means of access to the rich natural resources, which necessitated the removal of the old regime and the installation of one that

⁷*Machiavelli N.* The Art of War. Cambridge (MA), 1965. P. lviii.

⁸*Von Clausewitz C.* On War. London, 1982. P. 101.

⁹*Von Clausewitz C.* On War. London, 1982. P. 109.

was compliant the Bush regime's will.

An important point and distinction made by von Clausewitz is that "the conception that war is only part of political intercourse, therefore by no means an independent thing in itself".¹⁰ This is especially relevant for Western countries in the day and age where the buzzwords and concepts revolve around such slogans as 'the democratic control of armed forces', which amounts to little more than establishing a political monopoly on the control and use of stated-based military force. There is little transparency or accountability by the political force to the public in terms of wielding military power. The obligations are from the military to the political.

There does not have to be an open and full use of military force in order to bring about violence that shall ultimately compel an opponent to yield to one's political will. The United States and their policy of regime change through orchestrated revolutions have already proven this point. Additionally, the 'limited' war against Libya did not see a full deployment of military power against the Gadaffi regime. Decades of being the world's sole remaining superpower seem to have caused a sense of over confidence that has seen the neglect of Sun Tzu's warning regarding being involved in a protracted war, which it has been since September 2001 and has not got a clearly defined end to it.

Information as a Threat and an Opportunity

When one speaks of *information security* there is a number of implications (See Buzan et al, 1998 for a detailed account of securitisation). Firstly, that information is potentially some kind of threat and therefore must be secured. Flowing on from this basic underlying assumption that something is a threat, then there is the other side of the equation, i.e. that there is something being threatened. Therefore two immediate questions need to be asked before proceeding any further, in order to get a clear understanding and perspective. How is information a threat? Another question that stems from this first question is to whom is information a threat?

It should be noted that the institution that is responsible for defining and declaring a security threat is most often the state. By the state I am referring to the work of a country's parliament and/or president in terms of debate, declarations and laws passed. However, in determining what is to be judged a threat and what is not, is somewhat subjective and bound to the interests of the ruling power, rather than to the national interest or in the interest of the people. Although a perceived threat is often framed as being something that will harm the national interest or peoples' interest, rather than as harming the interests of the incumbent

¹⁰Von Clausewitz C. On War. London, 1982. P. 402.

political power as this is more easily 'sold' to the public.

One can deduce that a security threat is something that can potentially weaken or threaten the continued existence of a political entity (for the emphasis in this work is on political rather than social or economic entities), and in particular a political entity that at the time holds power. Where does 'information security' fit into the process then? Its importance lies in the tenant that perception is more important than reality¹¹. That is, people (the public) tend to react upon what they perceive as being reality rather than what may actually be the real case. Thus one's communication potential, assuming that the requisite tangible (physical) and intangible (reputation etc.) assets are present, is geared toward information dominance. That is, in the market place of ideas, to crowd out potential competitors in order for one's own message and vision to gain the upper hand and influence the target audience.

Mass media help to shape people opinions and values through bringing what may often be events that are remote from a vast majority of a country's population. As such, the mass media sphere is a hotly contested arena that transcends a number of planes – the political, the social, the educational and business. It is a mechanism that can unite these diverse sites and bring a common meaning. This becomes of even greater importance during times of political and economic instability.

There can be said to be, in a general sense, an association between security and stability. What is meant by this is that with security comes stability. The stability being sought and desired can be measured in both economic and political terms. For an entity seeks to be in a stable environment, which it is best adapted to, in order to maximize its chances of survival as changes to the environment entail adaptation. And when an entity is unable to adapt to a changing environment it can be substituted by another entity that is more suited and able to make the necessary modifications. Although at times it is necessary to embark on a course of change in order to survive.

Whether it is to ensure a stable political environment or to embark upon a course of change, an incumbent political entity needs to be able master the situation and to guide it. This is more often than not requiring that entity to control symbolism and perception, in order to first give meaning and understanding to an event as it unfolds and then to guide (or at least predict) the reaction of the public to those events. The penalty for failing to master this difficult and unpredictable process is very well illustrated by the events of the Appeasement Process in the mid-1930s, when Britain and France sacrificed Czechoslovakia to Nazi Germany in order to buy time. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain lost control of

¹¹*Louw P.E.* The Media and Cultural Production. Thousand Oaks, 2001. Pp. 1–35.

both the symbolism and the perception of the process, the result being not only the collapse of his reputation and political leadership, in spite of buying enough time for Britain to prepare against the coming German attack in the summer of 1940, he is an infamous figure in history. Therefore, to some extent, information cannot be regarded as being something that is strictly neutral in nature, but somewhat ideological instead.

This situation can be contrasted to more modern contexts where a definite relationship between war and politics has been seen. In 1982 the Falklands War saved the government of Margaret Thatcher from electoral defeat, the euphoria and patriotism of the moment was harnessed for political gain. In a similar scenario, the 9/11 attacks on the United States handed George W. Bush another term as President as the American people rallied around their leader. Conversely, the end of the First Chechen War (1994–96) was hastened by the incumbent Russian President, Boris Yelstin, owing to his extremely poor ratings in the polls and the coming Presidential election gave him no choice than to end the unpopular war in order to survive politically.

In connection with these different aspects, which have been described above, an overarching motivation for controlling the information sphere is that a belief exists that in doing so there is greater chance of regime survivability and that political, social and economic goals are more readily realizable. Attempts to control the content and flows in the information sphere are attempted through such means as strategic communication, communication management, public relations and so forth. These assumptions being derived from the view that by being able to determine the reality of an event by massaging public perception there is a greater possibility of being able to predict and determine events and reactions. Thereby this creates the idea that having greater control over shaping the process can be achieved through exercising a degree of information management.

Targeting Tangible Versus Intangible Assets

In a military environment, information operates at three different levels – tactical, operational and strategic¹². This mirrors the physical work of a military organisation in the physical world. Information and the ability to shape an audience's perception of an event and the actors involved are seen as being a crucial task. The ability to handle this information and messaging effectively to assist the physical military operations needs to be carefully considered and executed. If it is not, but is poorly managed it has the potential to adversely affect operational aspects of a military campaign.

¹²Information Operations: Warfare and the Hard Reality of Soft Power / Ed. L. Armistead. Washington D.C., 2004.

This paper concerns the issue of warfare, and informational and intangible aspects that influence it, differences exist in the relationship and nature of interaction between information, politics and armed conflict, between the various kinds of armed conflict – regular warfare and irregular warfare. Regular warfare involves an armed conflict between various state based military forces on a defined line of military operations. Irregular warfare involves state based actors versus non-state actors, such as in terrorism or insurgency style warfare, where there is a lack of a clearly defined front line.

Terrorism as a weapon and tactic of choice is often selected by the weaker side owing to the asymmetric aspects of the conflict. That is, they are unable to compete owing to lacking the requisite material, manpower and finances to wage a short and successful war against their opponent¹³. Therefore there is a necessity to find another factor to be in effect a form of equaliser in this imbalance. Information and the ability to message and influence an audience takes on a central role as a result.

As stated above, terrorism is the weapon of the weaker opponent. Therefore the role of information and the contest to influence the minds and actions of a selected audience – waging an information campaign alongside a military campaign. This is not necessarily a contest to win over hearts and minds by the different sides, although this can also be a valid objective. Another central point is the issue of security, and above all human security. If the domestic civil population do not feel safe this may be translated into political demands, which may actually benefit the political agenda of the terrorists. Information and communication are used as the means to project certain images, opinions and beliefs, which can be used either as a deceptive ploy or to shape the environment of the battle space through influencing the information space.

One of the aims of terrorists is to create a certain sense of fear in society. Fear exists when two sets of circumstances are simultaneously present in a society under terrorist threat. Firstly, that there must be a perception that something bad/negative has a high likelihood of happening (such as a bombing or hostage taking). Secondly, that there is a perception that the bad/negative event can happen to me (the individual). An important point to understand is that this is based upon the perception of the audience/public and not necessarily a reality. For all intents and purposes, perception is reality, and it is what people react to and based their decisions upon¹⁴. The sense of uncertainty and risk can elevate the public sense of outrage, which may be used to pressure the political decision makers.

¹³*Ganor B.* The Counter-Terrorism Puzzle: A Guide for Decision Makers. New Brunswick, 2005.

¹⁴*Simons G.* Mass Media and Modern Warfare: Reporting on the Russian War on Terrorism. Farnham, 2010.

The methods used by terrorists can be explained through analysing the role of tangible and intangible assets, and how these two sets are related to each other in the greater strategic considerations of terrorism. Tangible assets are those physical objects that can be attacked by terrorists, such as buildings, people and vehicles. These are normally of symbolic or military value, and are intended to weaken physically or psychologically their opponent. They are physical objects that can be seen and touched.

Intangible assets, on the other hand, are objects that cannot be touched physically, but they exert an impact upon the outcome of a battle or campaign. These assets are such things as reputation, brand, sense of security, legitimacy and resolve/will to fight. Although these aspects cannot be physically touched, they have a profound impact upon an opponent's ability to wage or continue to wage an effective military campaign. These intangible assets are adversely affected through attacks upon the tangible assets, which points to the primary aim of attacking tangible assets is to diminish an opponent's intangible assets.

This degradation of an actor's intangible assets shall only be effective though, if knowledge of the terrorist events is widespread and vivid. The most usual and effective means of transmitting news of terrorist acts is through the mass media, and more increasingly through social media and the internet. It links people to events that may otherwise be remote or unnoticed. Mass media has the ability to relay events, which are often descriptive rather than analytical in nature. An event is shown to happen, but not why. These events are newsworthy in themselves as they are dramatic and of interest.

There is a side effect of this process though. Stories constructed in this manner can actually create a greater sense of risk and uncertainty, even if this is not the intention of the media outlets or journalists. By covering a story concerning a terrorist act there is a possibility of amplifying the operational capacity of a terrorist group. Because after the story it is not known whether the terrorist group that was responsible has the ability to launch another attack immediately or that they have exhausted their capacity for the time being. This then can be potentially translated into political pressure through demands to assure or guarantee various intangible assets.

There is no guarantee that the terrorist group shall get precisely the coverage that they want from an act of terrorism. Simply, they do not have the ability to strictly control how the message is framed and covered in the mass media. However, by committing acts of terrorism there is the possibility to influence the hot topics covered in the mass media and thereby what is in the news (which may not be ordinarily covered).

Regular warfare differs in a number of different respects to irregular warfare. One of

the chief differences is the involvement of state-based actors that oppose each other on a defined area, where front lines, exist and various belligerent forces are identifiable with their uniforms, symbols and weapons used. Although there may be inequality of access to mass media and communication assets, all parties are likely to have national and/or international media in order to communicate their values and narrative to domestic and foreign publics. Through the use of modern mass communication, a clear pattern leading up to a number of different wars is clearly observable, which dovetails with Sun Tzu's notion of deception, although applied more liberally, according to that proposed by Machiavelli. A great deal of effort is made in establishing the narrative of the reluctance to go to war, and that this is done as a last resort only. The wars against Iraq, Pakistan, Libya, Serbia (over Kosovo), and the worrying rhetoric and sabre rattling with Syria and Iran, demonstrate as posed by von Clausewitz the policy and heavily political nature of wars in the current context.

There is a distinct pattern of attempting to influence the perception, and therefore influence the relationship between the people to political leaders. As noted by Sun Tzu, a leader that is perceived in a positive light will accumulate a greater sense of legitimacy and following. This means that, unlike the irregular war, a clearly defined enemy is created in the political leader of the country, whilst simultaneously protecting their own image. This makes the use and conveyance of values and narratives very important. For instance, trying to shift the reputation of historically and commonly understood enemies or injustices is applied to the contemporary named enemy (or 'bad guy'). Thus nonsensical vocabularies and comparisons are made, for instance the use of the Soviet Union's crushing of the 1956 Hungarian Uprising to the 2008 Georgian-Russian War or the attempt to tar Saddam Hussein with the characteristics of Adolf Hitler. These are attempts at deception owing to their false basis. They are directed at civil publics than military ones, in order to influence consensus on the 'righteous' nature of the war in question.

When it comes to the issue of the definition of contemporary regular wars, a factor that is often absent is that of a clear definition of the conflict. Certainly there are slogans and branding applied to the various wars, political and armed conflicts. In terms of regular wars, these are increasingly being fought under an umbrella of 'humanitarianism', which is an oxymoron when applied to compelling one state to act according to another state's will. Examples of branding are clearly evident as well, to make something that is contrived appear to be natural, in line with this trend, the *Colour Revolutions* of the first decade of the 2000s have given away to the current *Arab Spring*.

However, in spite of this use of masking the true nature and identity of the wars and

revolutions being initiated and fought, there are serious flaws in the current system. These wars are not defined, and certainly the political statesmen of today are not capable generals (a condition noted as being desirable by Machiavelli), whose tendency to interfere in military matters and yet not understanding them shall result in severe problems in the future. The nature of war can also transform with time and events, the March 2003 invasion of Iraq started as a regular war between the American-led coalition, but transformed quickly into an irregular conflict (involving elements of insurgency and terrorism) following the occupation of the country. There was seemingly little done in terms of defining this particular war, apart from the primary goal of removing the political regime of Saddam Hussein and installing a government that would be compliant to political and economic demands imposed upon it. The US seemed to be somewhat unprepared for the insurgency that resulted from their heavy handed occupation of Iraq, which hints at the lack of clear definition and wider planning.

Conclusion

Although the manner of weaponry that is used to wage war has evolved into every more increasingly destructive technology, there are other factors and elements that have remained constant over time. The tangible factors and means of fighting have evolved with the economic and technological changes that have occurred in society. The Heaven and Earth elements described by Sun Tzu still have an impact upon military operations, but to a lesser extent as technological innovation has been minimising this issue with some success.

Many intangible elements and factors have proved to be resilient in their continued importance in creating and fighting wars. The continued relevance of politics, which imposes an increasing level of influence on war, where wars are used as an instrument of policy whereby another country is forced to submit to the political will of the aggressor. This has been a constant through the centuries. However, some elements have been ignored, such as becoming embroiled in a lengthy and poorly defined war.

The intangible elements of legitimacy, reputation, public will and opinion are all critical factors when shaping the information environment to support launching or continuing a military conflict. Both Machiavelli and von Clausewitz noted the centrality of politics to war, which still remains. War and politics have become perhaps even more inseparable in the contemporary context, politics determines where and when armed force is used, and to what extent it is deployed against the opponent. As noted by Machiavelli, there are a number of similarities between the military and political spheres, such as the need to understand and shape the tangible and intangible environment around them.

As such, there is a need to shape and influence the opinions and perception of

various publics when preparing to wage a war. The situation creates the situation where an information war runs before and then parallel to the physical fighting in regular warfare. In irregular warfare the information war runs parallel to the fighting. The narratives, vocabulary, values, frames and images need to be carefully nurtured and controlled in order to cultivate the desired effects upon the target publics. Intangible assets before or during a war can be both an opportunity and a threat to political regimes, depending on the prevailing conditions in the society concerned.

Bibliography:

1. Information Operations: Warfare and the Hard Reality of Soft Power / Ed. L. Armistead. Washington D. C., 2004.
2. *Buzan B., Waever O., de Wilde J.* Security: A New Framework for Analysis. Boulder, 1998.
3. *Von Clausewitz, C.* On War. London, 1982.
4. *Ganor B.* The Counter-Terrorism Puzzle: A Guide for Decision Makers. New Brunswick, 2005.
5. *Louw P. E.* The Media and Cultural Production. Thousand Oaks, 2001.
6. *Machiavelli N.* The Art of War. Cambridge (MA), 1965.
7. *Simons G.* Mass Media and Modern Warfare: Reporting on the Russian War on Terrorism. Farnham, 2010.
8. *Sun Tzu.* Art of War. Philadelphia, 2003.