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CLAUSEWITZ AND THE POST POST-MODERN AGE: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE UTILITY OF MANOEUVRE AND THE CLAUSEWITZIAN CONCEPT OF CENTRE OF GRAVITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Maj G.J. Walsh

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Exercise Solo Flight

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EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

Summary

The purpose of this paper is to examine the closely-linked concepts of *Manoeuvre* and *Centre of Gravity* when applied in the context of the asymmetrical battlespace and the *Comprehensive Approach to Operations*. These concepts have come to characterize warfare in the 21st Century. Following a brief outline of the key concepts noted above, this discourse will evaluate the degree of success achieved by military commanders practising *Manoeuvre* during the 1991 Gulf War and the more recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In turn, the analysis will culminate with an assessment of the continuing relevance of *Clausewitzian* logic in future conflicts.

Introduction

It is rather remarkable thing that in the year 2015 we as military strategists are still concerned with the ideas and deductions of a Prussian aristocrat whose personal military context is more than 200 years old. Indeed, the seminal text *On War* by Carl Von Clausewitz (Clausewitz) was inspired largely by the events of the *Napoleonic Wars* on the European continent which bear no greater similarity to modern conflicts than do 19th Century politics to 21st Century global affairs. Regardless, Clausewitz continues to inform and influence military commanders today and his theories remain ubiquitous in academic circles concerned with the *Operational Art*; defined as the "...linkage between

tactics and strategy.”¹ Indeed, if Sun Tzu’s *Art of War* can be said to have provided the philosophical foundation for modern military strategy, then it was Clausewitz who refined this into a working compendium for military leaders.

This is particularly true of Clausewitz’s concept of *Centre of Gravity*, which became fashionable in the post-Cold War era due to its close relationship with the rise of *Manoeuvre* as preeminent aspect of Western military doctrine. And though both of these terms will be better-defined below, for now it is worth noting that *Manoeuvre* is based primarily on a reevaluation of the most effective means to defeat an adversary. For many proponents of the manoeuvrist approach, Clausewitz’s *Centre of Gravity* provided a conceptual focal point or object that the practice of *Manoeuvre* sought to identify and exploit. With the advent of the asymmetrical and non-linear conflicts of the 21st Century and the rise to prominence of the *Comprehensive Approach to Operations*, both of these theories have been proven to be remarkably adaptable.

In turn, this paper will demonstrate that the Clausewitzian concept of *Centre of Gravity*, as encapsulated by the contemporary practice of *Manoeuvre*, continues to provide military commanders with an effective and flexible doctrinal framework that address the challenges of the modern battlespace. Particular attention will be given to the effective exercise of *Manoeuvre* during the 1991 Gulf War and the more recent wars in the Iraq and Afghanistan.

¹ William S. Lind, “The Theory and Practice of Maneuver Warfare.” In *Maneuver Warfare: An Anthology*, edited by Richard D. Hooker. Novato: Presidio Press, 1993, 9.

The Doctrinal Nexus between *Manoeuvre* and *Centre of Gravity*

In order to properly assess the contemporary effectiveness of the above terms, it is first necessary to properly define them within the doctrinal framework. As previously noted, Clausewitz first introduced the concept of *Centre of Gravity* through *On War* in which he defines it as the “...focal point of force and movement, upon which the larger whole depends...”² Since *On War* was based on Clausewitz’s experience during the height of the Industrial Revolution in Europe, he largely spoke of *Centre of Gravity* in terms of concentrations of force.³ Indeed this rather literal and direct application of the term stems from the linear set-piece manner of conflict that dominated Western warfare throughout his lifetime.⁴

For this reason, the more literal concept of *Centre of Gravity*, based primarily on the concentration of force on the battlefield, was by the 20th century rather outmoded. Indeed it was not until the 1980s when Western military scholars began to embrace a more contextualized and figurative interpretation of *On War* that *Centre of Gravity* began to creep back into military doctrine.⁵ Although Clausewitz may have originally theorized *Centre of Gravity* in terms of force composition and kinetic action, during the twilight of the Cold War, military thinkers began to view this concept as one that could be applied to

² Antulio J. Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 177.

³ Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State: The Man, His Theories, and his Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 9.

⁴ Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 82-83.

⁵ Antulio J. Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, 177-178.

any factor, feature, or consideration that contributes to an understanding of how conflicts are defined, won and lost.⁶

For example, some scholars have suggested that American Cold War policy during the 1980s reflected a realization that the *Centre of Gravity* for the Soviet Union was not its military forces in Europe or even its nuclear arsenal but rather its ability to economically sustain its authoritarian governance model.⁷ This shift in American strategy is widely cited as a key contributing factor in the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ending of the Cold War.⁸ In short, when applied as a more abstract concept free from the linear anchor that had typically been its hallmark, Clausewitz's *Centre of Gravity* gained greater elasticity and greater utility for the 20th century.

At the same time, Western militaries were beginning to embrace a new manner of warfare that was driven by the inability of the United States to achieve victory in the Vietnam War despite its vastly superior military strength.⁹ As leading scholar Stuart Kinross notes, during the 1960s, “[t]raditional methods of closing with and destroying the enemy remained the focal point of [American] tactical doctrine and foreshadowed the search and destroy tactics in Vietnam.”¹⁰ In the wake of Vietnam, Western militaries began to embrace a more scholarly approach to the *Operational Art* and from this emerged the concept of *Manoeuvre*.

⁶ Michael I. Handel, *Clausewitz and Modern Strategy* (Abingdon: Frank Cass & Co Ltd., 1986), 137.

⁷ Stuart Kinross, *Clausewitz and America : Strategic Thought and Practice From Vietnam to Iraq*. New York: Routledge, 2008), 104-105.

⁸ Lawrence Freedman, *The Cold War: A Military History* (London: Cassell & Co, 2001), 65.

⁹ Stuart Kinross, *Clausewitz and America*, 54-55.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

Instead of simply amending or improving existing doctrine, *Manoeuvre* represented a paradigm shift under which the idea of a military victory and the means of achieving it were reimagined. Notwithstanding the ground-breaking effects of the manoeuvrist approach on military doctrine, this rather cerebral term was eventually boiled-down and defined by the United States Army as simply "... the movement of forces in relation to the enemy to secure or retain positional advantage."¹¹ Regardless, as with Clausewitz's initial attempt at explaining *Centre of Gravity*, the simplicity of *Manoeuvre*'s official and literal definition belies its functionality and potential utility when contextualized.

Indeed, *Manoeuvre* has become synonymous with the notion of understanding an opponent's composition, capabilities and strategy in order to outpace them whilst striking where they are most vulnerable.¹² It is no surprise therefore that Clausewitz's *Centre of Gravity* was revived and reinterpreted by many manoeuvrists who viewed it as a foundational concept for manoeuvre warfare. This lasted beyond the end of Cold War and *Manoeuvre* even came to dominate Western military doctrine well into the 21st Century.¹³ Thus, despite its apparent outmodedness at the end of the 20th Century, Clausewitz's *Centre of Gravity* was given new doctrinal life by the manoeuvrists who have occupied the role of doctrinal zeitgeist for the past 25 years. As noted in detail below, this 200 year old concept would serve military commanders well during the 1991 Gulf War as well as the asymmetrical conflicts undertaken by the United States and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

¹¹ William S. Lind, "The Theory and Practice of Maneuver Warfare", 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³ Stuart Kinross, *Clausewitz and America*, 199-200.

The 1991 Gulf War

If *Manoeuvre* can be said to have gained traction in scholarly circles during the 1980s then it certainly took flight following the 1991 Gulf War (Gulf War). Indeed, many pundits pointed to the relatively swift and bloodless victory achieved by the American-led Coalition as a prime example of *Manoeuvre* in action.¹⁴ In particular, manoeuvrists praised the strategy employed by Coalition Commander, General Norman Schwarzkopf, who focused his efforts on the Republican Guard units of the Iraqi Army which served as the backbone of Saddam Hussein's fighting force and presented the greatest threat to coalition forces.¹⁵ When the ground campaign commenced in February of 1991, Coalition forces largely bypassed the primary Iraqi force occupying Kuwait choosing instead to lure the Republican Guard from its positions inside Iraq. When the Republican Guard did not join the battle, the remaining forces inside Kuwait capitulated in short order.¹⁶

In this example, Schwarzkopf's use of *Manoeuvre* stems from his decision to employ a plan that sought to achieve victory without necessarily defeating or destroying the enemy's military forces. By zeroing in on the Republican Guard units as the primary *Centre of Gravity* for the Iraqi forces, he concluded that victory could be achieved by destroying this minority force alone. And though Iraqi casualties were high during the Gulf War, the fact is that Schwarzkopf's plan resulted in the complete liberation of

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Richard Iron. "What Clausewitz (Really) Meant by 'Centre of Gravity'." *Defence Studies*. Autumn 2001, Vol. 1 Issue 3, p109, 110.

¹⁶ Alastair Finlan, *The Gulf War 1991* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003), 12.

Kuwait within 100 hours.¹⁷ This suggests that a more direct strategy of engaging and destroying all Iraqi forces would likely have resulted in a more prolonged and costly campaign for both sides. It is no surprise therefore that *Manoeuvre* garnered considerable praise and attention from Western scholars following the 1991 Gulf War.

However, despite the creativity and ultimate effectiveness of Schwarzkopf's plan, the Gulf War was still primarily a set-piece conflict involving opposing conventional military forces. This suggests that the application of Clausewitzian logic was not necessarily a significant stretch. Regardless, speed and sheer boldness of the Coalition ground campaign brought about a greater understanding and appreciation for *Manoeuvre*. By the turn of the 21st Century, the manoeuvrists had come to dominate Western military circles but this would be a limited honeymoon as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would put Clausewitzian logic to perhaps its greatest test. The Gulf War was still primarily a linear conventional war; however, the fact that Schwarzkopf employed two-century-old Clausewitzian logic whilst commanding the most technologically advanced military force in history suggests that concepts such as *Centre of Gravity* are both relevant and functional in the context of modern war.

The Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

For the purpose of this analysis the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that occupied Western military forces during the first decade of the 20th Century will be considered together. And though it is recognized that each conflict possessed its own unique causes, characteristics and consequences, in the same breath, they also possess a number of key

¹⁷ Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 8-9.

similarities. In particular, both conflicts were initiated by well-executed invasion campaigns that were characterized by their use of *Manoeuvre* and *Centre of Gravity*. Further, both conflicts would later devolve into intense and prolonged counterinsurgency campaigns that would challenge conventional Western military wisdom, including Clausewitzian logic, like no other conflict since the Vietnam War.

In the case of Afghanistan, the US-led invasion, dubbed *Operation Enduring Freedom*, began in October, 2001 and this opening phase is generally considered to have ended in March of 2002 when all significant Taliban and Al Qaeda resistance was quelled; if only temporarily.¹⁸ This initial phase is also cited as key example of the effective use of *Manoeuvre* because of the speed with which American special operations forces (SOF) were deployed to Afghanistan. Remarkably, before the end of 2001, a few hundred SOF operators, working with local Afghan forces had managed to topple the Taliban regime and capture Afghanistan's two largest cities.¹⁹ This initial victory had been achieved with limited engagement, by moving swiftly and by focusing on the key cities that constituted the Taliban government's *Centre of Gravity*. Indeed, in 2002, *Manoeuvre* was not only relevant but it appeared to be the answer to many of the West's military challenges.

This would carry over into the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq, confusingly dubbed *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, which was also applauded as a masterful piece of manoeuvre warfare. With a relatively small ground force of just over 100,000, and

¹⁸ US Army Center of Military History, "The United States Army in Afghanistan - Operation Enduring Freedom," last accessed 30 May 15. <http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/Afghanistan/Operation%20Enduring%20Freedom.htm>, 3.

¹⁹ William H. McRaven, "The Theory of Special Operations." In *Thesis: The Theory of Special Operations* (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 1993), 2.

following a brief air campaign, American and allied forces were able to swiftly strike deep into the heart of Iraq, capturing the capital of Baghdad within three weeks.²⁰ The regime of Saddam Hussein was quickly toppled thereafter. Iraqi forces had expected a more prolonged buildup of forces in advance of the invasion and they were caught off guard by the early attack. Similar to his plan for the invasion of Afghanistan two years prior, General Tommy Franks viewed Iraq's largest cities and in particular Baghdad as the *Centre of Gravity* of the Hussein regime. Accordingly, his forces bypassed a large number of Iraqi defenders in order to capture the capital as quickly as possible.²¹

However, in both Iraq and Afghanistan, it was not the initial invasions that presented the greatest strategic challenges but rather it was the counterinsurgency campaigns that followed them. Faced with an enemy force that was interwoven within a hostile civilian population and superposed on historic ethnic and sectarian divides, the Western forces tasked with securing Iraq and Afghanistan were presented with a very complex challenge to which existing doctrine, including *Manoeuvre* and Clausewitz, did not appear to have an answer. The lessons learned during the Vietnam War, however, remained clear and few pundits advocated for a return to the 'search and destroy' tactics of old. Instead, scholars and commanders alike sought to adapt Western doctrine to this new way of war.

In place of military formations and kinetic action, *Manoeuvre* could be modified to apply to peace support operations, reconstruction projects, and even insurgent reconciliation and reintegration programs. United States Secretary of Defence Donald

²⁰ John R. Ballard, John K. Wood & David W. Lamm. *From Kabul to Baghdad and Back: The U.S. at War in Afghanistan and Iraq* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012), 82-83.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Rumsfeld was among the first to identify the public support as a *Centre of Gravity* for both sides of the conflict.²² Using Clausewitz's initial concept as a guide, scholars and military commanders alike simply looked to determine where the "focal point of force and movement"²³ would be for an enemy that neither concentrated itself in large numbers and whose movements were largely invisible. The resulting deduction was that the insurgent forces rely heavily on the support of the civilian population for both their military and logistical needs as well as their freedom of movement. Thus, the will or support of the population was determined to be a key insurgent *Centre of Gravity*.

This certainly was not a novel concept in 2003 and 2004 as the insurgent movements in Iraq and Afghanistan began to gain steam. Indeed, American strategy during the Vietnam War was firmly based on the notion of 'winning the hearts and minds' of the Vietnamese people. However, kinetic operations in Vietnam also remained the principle element of the American war strategy throughout.²⁴ In the context of Iraq and Afghanistan, the application of Clausewitzian logic to the question of *Centre of Gravity* required some further adaptation of the original concept. Logically, if a non-combatant force is the enemy's principle 'source of strength' then it follows that this cannot be denied to the enemy through kinetic action alone. Thus, in order to 'strike' at the enemy's *Centre of Gravity* in Iraq and Afghanistan, non-kinetic operations aimed at establishing stability and trust amongst the population became a critical part of the strategy.

²² Antulio J. Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War*, 178.

²³ *Ibid.*, 177.

²⁴ Lawrence Freedman, *The Cold War: A Military History*, 66.

It is from this Clausewitzian deduction that the concept of a *Comprehensive Approach to Operations* emerged. This was based on the recognition that military forces did not necessarily possess the requisite skills, assets or capabilities to conduct the kinds of operations necessary to ‘target’ the support of the civilian populations.²⁵ Accordingly, Western military forces began to deploy with their civilian governmental counterparts who brought expertise in areas such as policing, humanitarian relief, diplomacy, and civil infrastructure development. Whilst military forces provided the necessary security, it was these civilian agencies, often working in conjunction with non-government organizations, that arguably became the principle instrument of strategy in the context of counterinsurgency operations.

At first glance, the *Comprehensive Approach to Operations* would appear to be entirely incongruent with Clausewitzian logic; however, an argument could be made that it is in fact *Manoeuvre* by another name. Instead of focusing primarily on the destruction of insurgent forces, a tactic that proved counterproductive and costly in Vietnam, the use of civilian agencies and non-kinetic effects to influence the civilian population is merely a creative means by which to strike where the enemy’s strength is concentrated, its *Centre of Gravity*, in order to achieve more decisive results sooner. Indeed the *Comprehensive Approach to Operations* is Clausewitz for the 21st Century; it stems from a contextualized application of the principles of *On War* that adapts the concept of *Centre of Gravity* to the very esoteric factors affecting counterinsurgency operations. The wars

²⁵ Christian Leuprecht, “Conclusion.” In *Security Operations in the 21st Century: Canadian Perspectives on the Comprehensive Approach*, edited by Michael Rosteck and Peter Gizewski. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011, 241-242.

in Iraq and Afghanistan thus demonstrate that Clausewitzian logic may be dated but it is certainly not outmoded nor is it lacking in continued utility in the 21st Century.

Conclusion

As noted above, it was Clausewitz's *Centre of Gravity* that provided a conceptual focal point or object that the practice of *Manoeuvre* sought to identify and exploit. It is thus reasonable to conclude that Clausewitzian logic is at the core of manoeuvrist theory. With the advent of the asymmetrical and non-linear conflicts of the 21st Century and the rise to prominence of the *Comprehensive Approach to Operations*, both of these theories have been proven to be remarkably adaptable. As demonstrated by the effective exercise of *Manoeuvre* during the 1991 Gulf War and the more recent wars in the Iraq and Afghanistan, the Clausewitzian concept of *Centre of Gravity*, encapsulated by the contemporary practice of *Manoeuvre*, continues to provide military commanders with an effective and flexible doctrinal framework that address the challenges of the modern battlespace.

In closing, it is worth noting that the current Western campaign against the so-called 'Islamic State' forces in Iraq and Syria has also introduced a new dimension to warfare. Undaunted, military scholars and commanders alike continue to speak in Clausewitzian terminology when formulating and describing the Coalition's strategic vision. As with Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, it seems that sound strategic theories and principles are timeless. Indeed, after almost two centuries, it does not appear as though Clausewitz will be vacating Western military doctrine any time soon.

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