

CLAUSEWITZ VS CLAUSEWITZ A DISCUSSION OF HOW HISTORY APPLIES TO OPERATIONS TODAY

*Major General (ret) Professor Visarion NEAGOE, Ph D**
Major Petre LUCA

***Abstract:** This paper addresses the center of gravity doctrine; this doctrine is applicable to some wars, at some moments, but not to all of them. Clausewitz predicted this and stated that “in war the result is never final”. We argue that attacking one party’s center of gravity results in its defeat only when both adversaries apply the same strategy, namely the classic war. Today, finding the center of gravity is an integral part of the planning process.*

***Key words:** Clausewitz, history, center of gravity, discussion, doctrine.*

We throw clay to shape a pot, but the utility of the clay pot is a function of the nothingness inside it. We bore out doors and windows to make a dwelling, but the utility of the dwelling is a function of the nothingness inside it. Thus, even though we value what exists, it is what does not exist that we use. — Dao De Jing¹ (Laozi)

Argument

This article addresses one of the major themes debated today by the military theorists – the center of gravity (COG). Given its name we could not think of anything less than to compare it to the Gordian knot of contemporary operational-designing and campaign-planning. Is this really

* Member of Academy of Romanian Scientists, email: visarionneagoe@yahoo.com.

¹ Roger T. Ames, David L Hall *A philosophical translation - Dao De Jing – Making this life significant*, Ballantine Books, New York, 2003.

true? Does it have the same meaning for us as it had for Clausewitz? Does it have the same meaning for today's conflicts as it had for Napoleonic Wars?

A look through history

Since Clausewitz, every professional strategist or planner has invested knowledge and thought in finding his enemy's center of gravity with the purpose of bringing about its defeat. This is a measure of performance, almost everybody is looking after this "focal point on which all our energy should be directed"². What is the measure of efficiency then? How many wars have been won by identifying one's center of gravity? Arguably very few! This means that either the planners were wrong in identifying it, or such a thing does not really exist the way we define it! Let us start with how this concept appeared.

Everybody credited Clausewitz for enlightening the war strategy. It is a trademark: when speaking about the center of gravity, you speak about Clausewitz theory! Nevertheless, wars had been won long before Clausewitz; were the Greek, Persian, Roman or Ottoman empires' strategists – to name only a few superpowers – unaware of this concept?

If we take Clausewitz's hint that "for a nation the center of gravity lies mainly in its capital"³ and we think about the examples above we find that it is somewhat true for the Persian Empire which was defeated, but did not vanish and as a matter of fact continued to exist as an empire long after Macedonian conquest; it is true for the Punic wars when the burning of Carthage meant the end of it; but it is not true when speaking about Gaelic or Germanic wars that Roman empire fought. Also, on a bigger scale, the Ottomans' several hundreds of years of conquest of Greece or Bulgaria did not result in the disappearance of these countries or nations. We will argue here that **no nation or enemy can be destroyed**, unless such thing as a catastrophe or genocide happens and refer here to Mayan or Inca empires as instances. They can be defeated at a moment, but they somehow always recover.

² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, NJ, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1976.

³ Ibidem 2

So Clausewitz's theory does not apply entirely to the antiquity or medieval age. Some will think, of course, he was a modern age general and the war was entirely different by then. Well, was it really? Is Clausewitz closer to contemporary age rather than antiquity and medieval age?

Clausewitz was a general that fought for the Prussian and then Russian empire during an age that we largely define as Napoleonic Wars. For that reason, it is certain that he tried to theorize his experience. At that time, Prussia was a challenger and not a superpower in Europe. It was no match for Russian, British, French or Austrian armies altogether. The point Clausewitz made was: "defeat your enemy in one decisive battle and bring him to the negotiations because we do not have enough forces to conduct an attrition war"⁴. Well this was valid for Napoleon also 20 years before Clausewitz wrote "On War" and that is how he was victorious at Austerlitz or Jena-Auerstedt. But why did he lose the campaign in Russia? According to Clausewitz's theory, he defeated Russians several times and he even conquered Moscow so everything should have been right for him in targeting the COG. What made the difference? **Introducing operational and strategic depth.** Russians negated their opponent's strongpoint and let the winter take its toll. With logistic lines overstretched in the depth of Russian prairie, Napoleon's fine army crumbled and barely managed to escape at Berezina, thanks to the sacrifice of several thousand Swiss soldiers. The COG slipped away from Napoleon.

Now, Clausewitz obviously learned some lessons when fighting against the French and even if he died in 1831 this was clearly applied by his successors in the battle of Konnigratz 1866, when the Prussian general Moltke defeated the Austrian forces and started the build-up of the Great Germany. So, in this situation the COG worked! Let us see what happened after that. In 1870, the Prussian-led Germanic federation trapped the French armies at Sedan, inflicting heavy losses and capturing emperor Napoleon III. Well, this war was over according to Clausewitz, but not to the French who abolished Monarchy, proclaimed the Republic and started a new war. Prussians had to fight again, conquer Paris and secure their victory which meant taking over some territories, only to give them back afterwards.

⁴ Stephen L Melton *Addressing the fog of COG – COG Analysis the black hole of Army doctrine* Combat Studies Institute press USACAC, 2012, Kansas.

So the COG doctrine was applicable to some conflicts, at some moments, but not to all of them. Clausewitz predicted this when, towards the end of his life, he wrote some letters in which he developed a theme about the changing nature of the war and even stated that he was not completely satisfied with the work he had done up until then⁵; we can find seeds of this even in “On war” where he states that “in war the result is never final”⁶. The truth is that by then, the era of absolute monarchies was almost over and the industry was indeed to radically change the nature of the war, transforming it into the total war. I will argue here, based on the historical examples provided, that **attacking one party’s COG results in its defeat only when both adversaries apply the same strategy, namely the classic war.**

However, the nature of war is changing now, as it was changing then. Hitler made the same mistake as Napoleon and got defeated, but up until then, he had conquered several capitals. Would those nations be wiped out from history and replaced by the Third Reich, we will never know. What we know instead is that almost every nation protracted an insurgency against Germans, so the conquest did not mean the end of their system. They continued to act in depth supported by the allies –“in small states supported by a more powerful one, the center of gravity lies in the army of the stronger state”⁷. The COG shifted again.

If Hitler, as radical and criminal as he was, could not bring about the defeat of these, then it is very unlikely that the 21st century conflicts, most of them counterinsurgencies, will end in the defeat of insurgents by solely military means. **Introducing the comprehensive approach.**

A look through nowadays situation

NATO’s comprehensive approach applied by the allied forces in the last two wars (Iraq⁸ and Afghanistan) identified the COG as “will of the people”. We find this in Clausewitz also, when he writes that power of

⁵ Carl Von Clausewitz, *Two Letters on Strategy*, translated by Peter Paret and Daniel Moran, USA CGSC , 1984, Kansas.

⁶ Op.cit. 2.

⁷ Op.cit. 2.

⁸ The Iraq campaign was not NATO-led; however, art. 5 was invoked by the US and the comprehensive approach applied entirely to the OIF.

resistance “can be expressed as the product of two inseparable factors, the total means at his disposal and the strength of his will”⁹.

How was this defined? There are two major sides known to provide answer to this question. On one hand, there is the operational art side which states that this comes from the genius and experience of the commanders. On the other hand, there is the analysts’ side that says this is a logical process, cognitive by nature, so thinking must be done by a group of individuals. This resembles the commander or staff dilemma in the military today. The latter also provided the “ends – ways – means” approach and the “objective – critical capabilities – critical requirements – critical vulnerabilities” algorithms in defining, identifying and targeting a COG.

The first side can hardly be visible, but very much felt – similarly to the force of gravity. When Gl. Petraeus and Gl. McChrystal steered the campaign strategy in Iraq respectively Afghanistan towards “counterinsurgency thinking” everybody felt it, some got it, some did not, some effects were achieved, but we still need more time to see what people will finally chose. It was their job as commanders to tell the subordinates what the right objectives were and they did it.

So how did the staff manage to identify their parts which we mentioned above? Does the “will of the people” have critical capabilities? Arguably yes! (However this is valid in a democracy! A dictatorship could not care less about the will of the people, as the dictator knows better). Nevertheless people can change things, can provide or not support to the insurgency for instance. What is the critical requirement assigned to this? That the people are free to choose and that they are aware we are the good side. What is the critical vulnerability – the essential condition - the security of the people which allows them to think freely and not under insurgents’ pressure. Therefore, the population must be protected. Here you have in a nutshell the “protect the population” line of operation.

So how did we perform? We had two choices: the Israel walls strategy or collocate with the people. (The last was a theme which both commanders embraced until the green on blue attacks occurred). We chose the latter. Measure of performance: we have developed the force protection facilities or vehicles to a point where the soldiers inside see very little of the

⁹ Op.cit. 2.

environment and we have developed ISR assets to strike primarily into operational and strategic depth of the insurgents. Measure of effectiveness – are Afghans more secure? Incident and civilian casualties’ rates say no! Are Afghans freer to travel? The ones that work for Afghan large companies yes, mostly because the companies pay the insurgents. However, the average Afghans have very little reason to travel farther than the local bazaar. Are they free to sell their raisins, watermelons, almonds or pomegranates? Yes, if they pay the insurgents! Are they free to grow crops and sell cannabis and opium? Yes, if they pay local police! Are they free to speak? Yes if the GSM companies pay the insurgents! Will they have free elections if NATO leaves?

Some argue that “will of the people” is not the COG and the COG cannot be a moral component based on the fact that morality cannot do anything by itself; basically the COG is physical and the moral component is a critical requirement for it to do something! Therefore the entire campaign was wrong! Arguably here, it makes no difference whether we targeted the will of the population or the population itself! Even if the COG were to be correctly identified we could not come up with tasks to engage it and more importantly we could not make all of us understand the environment! **We started as liberators and ended as occupants in the perception of the Afghan people.** We could not learn from history; hopefully we have learned something from the present.

Of course there will be arguments that all “actors” in the comprehensive approach must be analysed, that they have a contribution and that unity of effort must be achieved. Bottom line is the COG slipped away from us, if our intent was to engage it. So the Clausewitzian decisive battle never took place. Neither in the poppy fields of Marja, the ancient Kandahar (Alexander’s city), nor in the outskirts of Kabul.

The value

So what is the value of COG in today’s operations? “Plans are nothing, planning is everything” said GI Eisenhower and this is applicable here also – since finding COG is an integral part of the planning process. The value of COG is the understanding of the environment, understanding of the system of systems and applying effort where it is worth spending resources. **The point is not to expect the enemy to collapse when**

attacking the identified COG, but rather to continue to refine knowledge into understanding the future sources of conflict and limit the consequences.

Higher education for all the soldiers, a little more history and a little less individual or group superiority, multiculturalism, tolerance, acceptance, all must be engraved as values in a future where anybody can learn anything.

“I hate the sort of technical language that leads us to believe we can reduce the individual case to a universal, to the inevitable. Strategists manipulate these terminologies as if they were algebraic formulae, whose accuracy has long been established, that may be used as substitutes for the original reality. But these phrases do not even represent clear and definite principles.”¹⁰ – Clausewitz.



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¹⁰ Op.cit. 2.