

Transformation, evolution, and characteristics of armed conflicts and forms of warfare - from traditional to contemporary, from conventional to hybrid, and the implications for the future of Operational Art

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INTRODUCTION

The study of warfare has always been essential for developments in the military domain. War itself has been a defining part of history and has undergone developments in the way how and why it is waged. Today, talk is of *hybrid warfare* or *asymmetry of warfare* when discussing military conflicts. In order to avoid the mistake of simply following mainstream thinking and phraseology while failing intellectually to reflect upon the nature of warfare, serious thought has to be given to this question. Beginning with the definition of terms such as *traditional* or *contemporary* warfare, a clear understanding must be found of what is being discussed. If *traditional* warfare is understood from a twentieth century perspective, as conventional, World War I or World War II warfare, it must be remembered that at that time this was *contemporary* warfare. Having stated that, it becomes obvious that there has to be a common understanding of what is being discussed, before any answer to the following question is attempted: *What has changed in the evolution of warfare and how can we prepare for the future in the field of Operational Art?*

The following paper attempts an answer by concentrating on principles of operational warfare and their suitability to meet current and future challenges, as well as by evaluating operational-level approaches and their capability to cope with these problems. This should produce some clarity on whether the current interpretation of operational thinking is to be revised or meets future warfare requirements.

THEORY AND NATURE OF WARFARE

A precondition to any analysis of future military requirements has always been to go back to the nature of warfare. Only if it is understood *why* mankind wages war, can timeless principles be derived which help to predict the nature of future conflicts. In the early twentieth century, Alexandr A. Svechin emphasized the importance of understanding the great military thinkers. He not only stressed the importance of reading them, but also of producing critical studies.

*... We must not only read them, we must make serious critical studies of them...*¹

¹ Alexandr A. Svechin, edited by Kent Lee, *Strategy*, Canada, 2004, p. 80.

What Svechin stated one hundred years ago is exactly what today's military professionals need to focus on. Military thinkers and history are essential to any understanding, but must always be seen in a context with all the other influences at work during the epoch under consideration. Additionally, in order to add value, timeless principles must be abstracted from history and research and their applicability to modern times examined. Such principles, as well as the interrelations between, *inter alia*, policy, the economy, the human dimension, and social factors have always and will always influence war. The character of war, however, could also be understood in a contemporary way, as influenced by current developments and dominated by the prevailing international security environment.²

The Clausewitzian Trinity

In the early nineteenth century, Carl von Clausewitz, quite possibly the most quoted and most interpreted western military thinker, described the interdependence between passion, chance and policy. These primary strands combine the government, the military, and the people in the overall context of war.

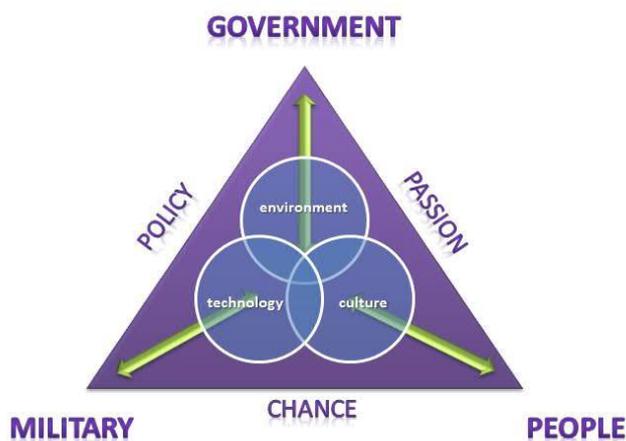


fig. 1 (author): Clausewitzian Trinity

² cf. Milan Vego, 'On Military Theory', *JFQ*, Issue 62, 3rd quarter, 2011, p

Passion represents blind natural forces in their varying intensities. War is an expression of pure violence without any limits.³ Mankind's passion to fight wars supports the ability to wage wars and guarantees the support for wars. Thucydides regarded this phenomenon as a natural part of the human character.

*...there were the savage and pitiless actions into which men were carried not much for the sake of gain as because they were swept way into an internecine struggle by their ungovernable passions. Then with the ordinary conventions of civilized life thrown into confusion, human nature, always ready to offend even where the law exists, showed itself proudly in its true colors, as something incapable of controlling passion...*⁴

Within this Trinity, passion, but also the chance that war provides, can be identified as a part of the human condition. The human dimension of war will always remain a key aspect of research, also if the primacy of politics, relating to the interaction between the government and the military, is analysed. Of course, the rationale behind a war must always be backed by policy. The human dimension, however, should never be underestimated as a reason for waging war, because war has always and will always (at least in the near future) be fought by human beings. War as a chance to motivate the people (to fight actively or at least to support the soldiers) and to gain an advantage should not be reduced to national interests alone.

In support of this approach, Martin van Creveld defines war as something more than the product of reasonable politics. He actually argues the other way around. Sometimes human beings look for goals to justify their natural will to fight. War is fascinating, as it provides adventure, inspiration, and entertainment. On the battlefield, human beings can prove their dexterity, skill, and basic survival instincts, free from the constraints of everyday conventions.⁵ Creveld's argument goes hand in hand with Carl von Clausewitz's statement in his *First Book*, i.e. that the passion which drives war has to come from the people.⁶ Looking back one century to the beginning of World War I, the population in Europe was clearly euphoric. The will to change things was a driving factor.

Clausewitz never stated that there was any hierarchy between the three strands *passion-policy-chance*, although he clearly highlighted the fact that the military was subordinated to the political. This makes his *Trinity* an enduring and timeless model of interdependencies and interrelations, applicable to all forms of armed conflict. Policy is not exclusive to nation states and must be used in a broad sense for all actors in conflicts. Thus, pursuant to the Clausewitzian

³ cf. Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, third edition, Ullstein Verlag, Munich, 2002, p. 28f.

⁴ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Penguin, London, 1972, p. 245.

⁵ cf. Martin van Creveld, *Die Zukunft des Krieges*, Gerling Akademie Verlag, Munich, 1991, p. 330f.

⁶ cf. Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, Ullstein Verlag, third edition, 2002, Munich, p. 46.

model, even warlords, rebel factions or terrorists can be seen as policy makers as regards the strand *reason for war*.

Another important aspect to consider concerning the human dimension is the term *chance*; *chance* as a driving factor in the sense of community, but also for the individual being to gain an advantage. Thomas Mann argued that World War I was an instrument to save society from decline. In his opinion, it was a chance to stop decadence by having a common goal and to regain strength from fighting for common interests instead of personal fulfillment.

Herfried Münkler, a German political scientist, has created the term *post-heroic society* to describe modern, western, feel-good societies. They have lost their will to survive and to fight.⁷ In contrast, people in less developed countries can be more easily motivated to risk their lives, because of the beckoning chance of improved living conditions - more evidence of the applicability of the Clausewitzian model in modern times.

Hybridity, Comprehensiveness, Whole of Nation Approach

Focusing all efforts in order to win wars lies in the nature of armed conflicts. A sound strategy combines all instruments of national power such as diplomacy, information, the economy, and the military in order to reach strategic goals. Going back to the beginning of the twentieth century, Alexandr A. Svechin's thesis was that war is not only waged on the armed front, but also, for example, on that of the economy. He mentions the important contribution of information in the form of propaganda, as well as economic and industrial autarky, and other preparations necessary in order to wage an offensive war.⁸

What Svechin was talking about is today called the *comprehensive approach* or *whole of government/nation approach*, i.e. the coordination and synchronization of all effects in order to achieve strategic goals. The term *hybridity*, often discussed at present, could be reduced to the simple definition *Comprehensive Approach conducted by the enemy without always following international rules or using our western values as a moral compass*. Looking at history, the use of covert means, a characteristic of hybridity, is not new. A prominent example was the faked attack by German Nazis in Polish uniforms at the beginning of World War II. But also in World War I, Germans made use of hybrid actions. They attempted to conduct large-scale sabotage in the United States affecting the war industry in order to cut logistic support for the Entente. Their method was arranging accidents at industrial plants or causing riots among workers.⁹ These covert actions were part of the means defined today as *hybridity in warfare*.

Symmetry & Asymmetry

It has thus been shown that the Clausewitzian Trinity still applies. A discussion of conventional warfare and other forms of conflict, however, requires a

⁷ cf. Herfried Münkler, *Kriegssplitter*, Berlin Verlag GmbH, Berlin, 2015, p.169f.

⁸ Alexandr A. Svechin, edited by Kent Lee, *Strategy*, Canada, 2004, p.84ff.

⁹ Alexandr A. Svechin, edited by Kent Lee, *Strategy*, Canada, 2004, p.109f.

common understanding. Today, *conventional warfare* is understood to be a relatively symmetric conflict between nation states, as it was waged in the twentieth century. The problem is that, today, the term *asymmetry* is applied to almost every armed conflict. The problem is that the opposite of *asymmetry* is *symmetry* which is not the same as *conventional*, in the above-mentioned manner. Looking at history, it becomes clear that *asymmetry* was always part of warfare. Starting with David against Goliath, continuing with the invasion of the Spanish Conquistadores, the Boer War in Africa or current fighting in Afghanistan, asymmetry has always existed. We can differentiate between asymmetry of the weak, like the Taliban, and asymmetry of the powerful, for example the Conquistadores slaughtering the Aztecs, or the Americans employing high-tech, unmanned aerial vehicles against terrorists. Even World War II, the classic example in any discussion of conventional warfare was not always symmetric. The thesis could be that asymmetry has always been the normal condition of warfare. The mistake is to take warfare in twentieth century Europe or in the Gulf region as the only references in conflict assessment. This leads back to the problem discussed above, between the nature and the character of warfare. Too much focus on the *character* of warfare, i.e. the contemporary aspect, makes serious and meaningful predictions concerning future conflicts impossible. The correct way would be to concentrate on the *nature* of warfare, in order to predict the future character of warfare, i.e. projecting timeless principles¹⁰ on the future joint operational environment.

OPERATIONAL ART

The evolution of operational art

The evolution of Operational Art goes back to the nineteenth century. Apart from Carl von Clausewitz, it was Moltke the Elder who developed revolutionary principles of Operational Art, such as *Auftragstaktik*, *Schwerpunkt* and *Aufmarsch*. Especially the revolutionary manner of troop deployments, made possible by the technological revolution (railways, telegraphy), changed the art of war. This resulted in principles such as deception, surprise, and being able to dictate the enemy the place and time of the decisive battle - principles still valid today. Different services developed, and the mutual support by synchronized component commands enhanced the effectiveness of warfare. Operations *Desert Storm* and *Iraqi Freedom* were examples of evolutionary highlights in our conventional understanding of warfare. Both operations were great military successes, but doubtful strategic victories, due to a lack of synchronization between the various levels of war, especially the political-strategic and the operational one.

The operational level developed as a link between strategy and tactics, mainly driven by growing complexity and technological evolution. It must, however, be remembered that during Clausewitz' time, the operational level was today's

¹⁰ For example, the interrelations between people, policy, warfighting,...

strategic level, and the military leader also served as the *government* in the *Trinity*.

Current understanding of Operational Art

The necessity of a level between policy, strategy, and tactics has not changed, although it remains challenging. The operational level of war should link strategic interests and goals with tactical actions by creating desired effects, and synchronize all components in order to ensure that the military contribution is in concert with the use of other instruments of power at the strategic level. That is done by defining the problem and developing an *Operational Approach* focused on the questions *What has to be done, and how can it be done?* Achieving conditions and effects in order to accomplish operational and military strategic objectives that ensure the overall end state may sound different from Clausewitz's definition, which states that battles are fought in order to serve the overall purpose of war¹¹, but the meaning is still the same. Martin van Creveld fully supports that argument by stating that Operational Art must serve strategic objectives, otherwise it becomes *grand tactics*, which refers to German efforts in the last months of World War II which did not affect strategic goals.¹²

CHANGES IN THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The modern operational environment is characterized by various factors. In today's information age, defining the Joint Operations Area is already a challenge. The Joint Operations Area can be defined geographically by using the classic factors *force-space-time*, but this cannot be done with other domains such as the information dimension, cyberspace, or the PMESII-system domain. Some elements of the Operational Environment have global reach and therefore have to be taken into special consideration.

Complex environment and wicked problems

The issues causing today's conflicts and those of the future are becoming more and more complex. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when Operational Art was developed, most of the conflicts within Europe were conflicts between nation states or civil wars. Since 9/11, when the *Global War on Terror* was begun by western communities, operations faced many different actors in conflict areas. Irregular adversaries with different motives became the majority, ranging from rebel groups to terrorist movements. Most of these conflicts have complex root causes and are interlinked. Another driver for this change in the Operational Environment was the ongoing globalization, which affected the strand of *Chance* in the Clausewitzian *Trinity*, especially in societies less post-heroic than western ones. People in less developed countries achieved insights into our daily way(s) of life by accessing the world-wide-web.

¹¹ cf. Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, third edition, Ullstein Verlag, Munich, 2002, p. 249f.

¹² cf. Van Creveld, Martin, Olsen, John Andreas, *The Evolution of Operational Art: From Napoleon to the Present*, Oxford University Press, 2011, p.56

From a human point of view, it is absolutely understandable that they also want to have access to better living conditions and thus start to migrate. Additionally, trends such as urbanization, the movement from rural areas to cities, the effects of climate change, the shortage of resources, *et al* can become important factors that change the operational environment.

The above-mentioned root causes create complex conflicts. The conflict areas are often home to different actors with diverging interests, objectives, and motives. Furthermore, most of these actors are interrelated, and every action taken produces multiple effects. Most problems at the political or strategic level are of this complexity. To describe this phenomenon, Rittel and Webber coined the term *wicked problems*. Given the functionalities of the strategic and operational level of war, solving these problems is key to mission success. One of the challenges is that these *wicked problems* sometimes can only be addressed if the desired outcome is known. Thus, in order to frame the problem properly, there has to be at least a tentative idea of how to solve it.¹³ The model used to create situational awareness pursuant to NATO doctrine is system analysis with its holistic approach. This method tries to analyze the actors, (inter)relations, links, and interdependencies in order to create an idea of how the actors behave and how they can be influenced. Understanding such a complex environment is the basis for further planning and seems to be the only approach that makes it possible to solve conflicts in a comprehensive manner. Nevertheless, it is not a guarantee for success. Even if it is possible to identify the lion's share of the system's behavior, there will be reactions with or without influence from inside or outside the system that cannot be predicted. According to thinkers like Clausewitz or Scharnhorst, there always will be the *fog of war*, i.e. something unpredictable. It is therefore important not to rely too much on planning tools, but also to take the nature of warfare into consideration.¹⁴ In comparison with earlier centuries, warfare has changed from a phenomenon with strategic, military, and economic dimensions into a much more complex one, which includes social, information, interethnic, religious, cultural and other aspects.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF OPERATIONAL ART

What, therefore, are the implications for the future of Operational Art to make it possible to cope with future challenges?

Applicability of Operational Art

There is no doubt that Operational Art can be applied to future joint operational environments. Operational Art, defined as a mixture of understanding the nature of war in terms of timeless principles, the character of warfare, and of how to use the knowledge and principles of new developments, will remain essential

¹³ cf. Rittel, Webber, *Developments in Design Methodology*, University of Michigan, Wiley, 1984, p.135ff.

¹⁴ cf. Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, third edition, Ullstein Verlag, 2002, Munich, p. 86.

for military leaders. These will, in addition to the skills listed, have to develop a sense of creativity and individual judgement that only can be gained from experience. One of the characteristics most important for operational-level leaders is their sense of when to act outside of doctrinal standards in order to counter the *friction of war* and to gain advantage of the situation. That kind of judgement, which Clausewitz also described as *coup d'oeil* adds leverage to the word *Art* in *Operational Art*. At the tactical level, knowledge of doctrine is the predominant tool for mission success.

Strategy, Operational Art, and tactics have to be sound

In certain conditions, destroying the enemy's military offensive capabilities may not achieve the overall end state. *Operation Iraqi Freedom* could be mentioned as a recent example. Military success was achieved, but the strategic level outcome was a collapse of state authority and a deteriorating security situation due to elements taking advantage of the vacuum that had been created. According to General Anthony Zinni (USMC, ret.), one of the lessons was that the political end state was not clarified in advance of the operation. He argues that the question *what then?*, as regards the transformation phase was never sufficiently answered by the political level.¹⁵ A century ago, Alexandr Svechin claimed that strategy, the operational-level use of military power, and tactics have to be sound in order to achieve strategic goals. This principle has not changed, nor will it change in the future. The current process of applying Operational Art within NATO and the EU, the COPD, but also similar ones at national levels (USA, UK), supports these demands by means of its functional structure and tools.

A sound understanding of *what is to be achieved* enables mutual support at all levels of war. That is guaranteed by the collaborative character of the process currently applied, which supports advice and guidance/expert knowledge, top-down and *vice versa*, during parallel planning efforts. Furthermore, the employment of all instruments of power at the state level, makes comprehensiveness key. Just as military effects have to support others, non-military effects will support and have influence on military ones. Especially in the future joint operational environment described above, there is a strong need to act comprehensively. In former times, when conflicts between nation states were the reason to go to war, there was also a demand to concentrate all instruments of power to meet strategic needs, such as preparing the economy for war. Nowadays, however, with multiple actors involved in a conflict, the need for comprehensiveness has gained enormously in relevance. In this regard, Operational Art not only synchronizes different components and joint functions, but also creates effects in support of other instruments of power following strategic guidance. This guarantees a sound sequence of strategic, operational, and tactical effects.

¹⁵ Lecture during Joint Warfighting Course 3/2016 Joint Forces Staff College in Norfolk VA, July, 2016

Hybridity, asymmetry - a chance to execute CA - Conclusions

Following the above-stated logic, hybridity and asymmetry have always been part of warfare. Asymmetry has begun to change, to shift its shape. It is thus not only an inherent part of the nature of warfare, but has, today, also become a part of the character of warfare. Therefore, preparedness for current and future threats requires both an awareness of timeless principles derived from military theory, and the ability to find innovative solutions to conflicts in the joint operational environment, because both approaches are part of the understanding of Operational Art.

Today's bad habit of following fashionable ideas has, unfortunately, also become a part of military culture. A change of political, social, or perceptual factors sometimes leads to profound military-theoretical truths being neglected or forgotten. Today's societies as well as political elites are busy spending too much time on what are perceived to be the latest problems, a development which may have been caused by the immense speed of the information age. Sometimes hindsight and foresight have no place in what is regarded as the daily routine. These factors drive the development of problem awareness which is only short-term, and produce solutions which also work in the short term only. The result is an undesirable and wrong understanding of strategy or Operational Art, often applicable to past wars, but not future ones.

The first recommendation is to see Operational Art as a comprehensive mixture of the theory of the nature of war, and of transferring timeless principles to the current and future character of war by using proven models and tools. The second recommendation is to spend resources on the individual education and advanced training of high-level military leaders. These need to develop a critical awareness and the individual creativity to decide, by understanding the overall context of war from the strategic to the tactical level. Maybe the changing future character of war will demand the development of new methodology and tools, but these are only instruments to facilitate Operational Art itself.

Bearing this in mind and taking the above-mentioned statement about the simple definition of *hybridity* into consideration, this special character of warfare can be addressed by applying Operational Art. Operational Art is comprehensive *per se*. The state of the art methodology currently used, focusses strongly on the *Comprehensive Approach*, and uses a synergy of all instruments of state power.

If the example of *fluidity* is applied to financial questions, it is clearly non-military. Such questions, however, are clearly part of the instruments of power a nation or organization can wield. Changes in the flow of money can nowadays easily be affected by cyber means and have great impact on nations. A combination of these elements in conjunction with, or in preparation for, an open conflict would meet the current understanding of *hybridity*. The effects are the same as they have always been in the nature of war and strategy.

Given the causal synergy between policy, strategy, the operational and the tactical level of warfare, a sound mutual understanding must exist between

these echelons in order to meet future challenges. The operational level as a core functionality positioned between strategy and tactics will always be the focal point of balancing military commitments in order to support strategic objectives. The answer to the question concerning the applicability of Operational Art in waging contemporary warfare is simple. Operational Art itself has always been the only way to cope with armed conflicts. Tactics has always been the means to execute and win decisive battles in order to support the overall goal of the war.

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