

# In Defense of the *Defense*

## The Continuing Political Value of “Denial of Enemy Aims”

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*Our discussion of the limited aim suggests that two kinds of limited war are possible: offensive war with a limited aim, and defensive war.*

*Here lies the origin of the distinction that dominates the whole of war: the difference between attack and defense.*

—Clausewitz, *On War*



### Introduction:

#### Air-Sea Battle in a Contested Geopolitical Environment

This article seeks to answer one very large question: how should the United States prepare to use military power during peacetime deterrence, protracted crises, and even war to resolve conflicting interests with another powerful state, such as China, when both powers also have substantial shared and interconnected interests? The answer to this question could affect future crisis stability in East Asia,

billions of dollars of interconnected interests, and billions in US military spending.

Traditionally, the ideal military goal in airpower theory calls for the United States to use superior or overwhelming firepower in tandem with coordinated mobility, speed, and precision at an operational-tactical level of warfare, or the level of “battle,” to produce such decisive effects that the enemy is virtually “disarmed” before he can even mount effective operations.<sup>1</sup> Crucially, we assume that this type of *battle-level military strategy* would then deliver *strategic-level military victory*—often implicitly equated with *total political victory* over a thoroughly defeated, demoralized opponent who, as largely accepted by such military planning, will surrender or capitulate entirely to US demands.<sup>2</sup> This strategy of battle, further described below, has focused in particular on destroying or “interdicting” targets behind the military front lines, often on a preemptive or preventive (i.e., offensive) basis. The presumption of such thinking is that the most effective use of airpower involves strategically and offensively incapacitating the adversary’s military machine via the systematic disabling or destruction of high-value targets on his home soil,<sup>3</sup> an approach we dub “strategic offensive interdiction” throughout the rest of the article.

Divorced from contextual political realities, the emphasis on strategic offensive interdiction makes eminent military sense. However, not all political and territorial rivalries lead to wars over completely opposed political stakes. In advising military and political leaders on how to discriminate on the use of force in strategic situations involving peer competitors, military theorist Carl von Clausewitz argued that they must strive to understand the actual political nature of the conflict at hand by answering the question, What war are we fighting? “Generally speaking,” wrote Clausewitz, “a military objective that matches the political object in scale will, if the latter is reduced, be reduced in proportion. . . . Thus it follows that . . . wars can have all degrees of importance and intensity, ranging from a war of extermination down to simple armed observation” (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in several pages

of oft-ignored discourse on the differences between Napoleonic-style, revolutionary “total war” versus the average, more bounded, and limited war aims of sovereign leaders both before 1789 and after 1815, Clausewitz implicitly argues that leaders must identify the prevailing policy goals, beliefs, and norms of interaction among major powers in any given era of competition among them and tailor the threat and use of force accordingly.<sup>5</sup> This, in turn, raises the question, What international system are we currently living in?

As this article shows, today’s East Asian security environment is much more fluid than the one during the Cold War, in which the global and European theaters were defined by two rigid, largely unchanging ideological blocks of states that refused each other trade, technological sharing, and finance, and which sat poised on the brink of World War III. Nor is it like the constant confrontation with Saddam Hussein from 1990 to 2003, or like that with Slobodan Milošević in the former Yugoslavia from the early 1990s through the 1999 bombing campaign. Instead of the “reinforcing cleavages” seen with these adversaries—in which all economic, political, moral, and military issues became directly counterposed—US conflicts of interest with today’s rising China are partial in scope and mediated strongly by dense and complex financial, trade, and diplomatic relations. Conceivably, this more nuanced twenty-first-century geopolitical reality may introduce significant constraints on the ideal airpower goal of full strategic offensives against an opponent’s home territory during a crisis or militarized dispute.

To move forward in the debate, the article first describes in greater detail the overall characteristics and thrust of strategic offensive interdiction, followed by a brief examination of today’s international system. It then draws upon Clausewitz’s often overlooked analysis of the restrained application of force during limited interstate conflicts between great powers. As the article demonstrates, Clausewitz’s analysis of variations in both political stakes and levels of warfare goes well beyond his concept of “centers of gravity” that contemporary readers so often cite to justify effects-based weaponry in airpower targeting theories.<sup>6</sup>

That said, one major obstacle to contemporary application of Clausewitz is his back-and-forth style both within and across sections. He disperses myriad points on wars of limited versus “absolute” political stakes alongside an equal dispersion of arguments pitched variously at the grand-strategic policy level, the military-strategic command level, and the lower levels of campaigns, battles, and, ultimately, individual combats and engagements. This constant variance between wars of absolute and limited political stakes, between the offense and the defense, and between different levels of warfare planning and employment, can easily obfuscate Clausewitz’s quite clear overall distinction between the strategic offensive and strategic defensive in wars between peer competitors who are not all-out ideological competitors.<sup>7</sup> The article rectifies this problem by systematically bringing together and interweaving his mutually supporting analytic statements on limited great-power wars to arrive at new concepts for military strategy and operational planning for future weapons systems in an evolving Asian geopolitical environment.

## The Central Role of Strategic Offensive Interdiction in Traditional Airpower Theory

Airpower advocates have a long history of arguing that offensive, strategically decisive operations are the most efficient and appropriate use of airpower. Despite acknowledgement of its defensive aspects, traditional notions are built on the idea of delivering quick victories at very low cost in US treasure and lives through decisive offensives that virtually disarm the adversary militarily and politically without having to fight his frontline forces indefinitely.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, the presumed, overriding military-strategic goal of customary airpower doctrine entails avoiding the high costs of prolonged, attritional action. In turn, airpower theory traditionally has considered grinding, protracted attrition warfare the logical consequence of using airpower to destroy frontline enemy forces alone,

leaving all of their logistics, population, industrial, energy, food, communications, and political command capabilities intact behind the lines. The latter reality allows the enemy to replenish and replace forces with new troops and supplies at will, backed up by continued intelligence monitoring and command instructions via intact communications facilities.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, the US Air Force's procurement, employment policies, operational planning, and, ultimately, doctrine have generally focused on hitting or interdicting "strategic" targets behind the front line, in many cases involving complete destruction of infrastructure with heavy civilian as well as military uses. Since the early days of flight, airpower theorists from Giulio Douhet, B. H. Liddell Hart, and Billy Mitchell through Operation Desert Storm's John Warden have envisioned air forces as providing the decisive "knockout blow" that generations of military leaders have sought after studying the classic Napoleonic-era works of Henri Jomini and Clausewitz.<sup>10</sup> For instance, during the American bombing campaigns in Europe and Japan during World War II, "strategic" bombing sought to destroy the enemy's economic infrastructure and even to punish and demoralize his population to the point where either the people would rise up and depose their leaders or simply find themselves completely unable to resist invasion forces on the ground.<sup>11</sup> The more complex of these arguments became known as the "industrial web theory," which held that disrupting, weakening, or destroying the right strands would collapse the entire systemic web needed to support the Nazi war effort.<sup>12</sup> During the Cold War, the apparent war-winning importance of the strategic bombing campaign in World War II transformed into the early organizational and technological rise of Strategic Air Command over Tactical Air Command.<sup>13</sup> In short, putting pressure on the civilian populace and/or the leadership in order to persuade enemy elites in the capital city to submit to maximal US political demands has never been far from airpower theorizing, whether attributed to Douhet at the beginning of the twentieth century or Warden more recently.<sup>14</sup>

Especially in the latest round of airpower theorizing, arguably initiated by Warden, the theory has addressed in one way or another the potentially revolutionary ability of airpower to range across the battlefield and enemy's larger home territory, hitting both tactical and strategic targets simultaneously via "parallel strikes," unblocked by major defensive hurdles.<sup>15</sup> This, in turn, allows airpower (and only airpower) to strike simultaneously key war-supporting nodes or targets in the enemy's "system"—that is, his overall socioeconomic and military organization. The latter includes factories, electric power facilities, industrial production facilities, transport nodes such as bridges, and—most important of all—top leadership centers and/or other intermediate levels of war command that would (in theory) yield far more intense and effective operational effects than dropping those same munitions on frontline forces.<sup>16</sup>

As Clausewitz famously argued, however, it is risky for military planners to decontextualize the notion of effects-based weaponry from the most likely political goals that politicians will seek in the threat and use of force when confronting a peer competitor. Ultimately, everything depends on the level of political stakes or, in Clausewitz's terms, the nature of the "political object."<sup>17</sup> The policy goals of the United States in any given geopolitical dispute, whether it threatens or uses force, will demand certain effects towards certain ends. In other words, what exactly is the strategic political context for military planning and procurements?

## The Strategic Operating Environment: Global Integration, Regional Fragmentation

*The modus operandi of the future is accommodation between leading powers at certain times and deterrence at others—a flexible combination of the main actors emerging to thwart the excessive ambitions of one of them.*

—Dilip Hiro, *After Empire: The Birth of a Multipolar World*

The world is entering a globalized age of “pragmatic multipolarity”—a loose network of interactions based on tactical cooperation among states to bolster their domestic identities and further their shared international interests, rather than a system of competing, well-defined blocs based upon utterly hostile ideological world-views. At a global level, the reality of unprecedented interstate and transstate socioeconomic networks creating an internationalized form of national wealth makes rising powers in all continents fear the societal costs of upsetting financial and trade flows. Furthermore, the interelite agreement on norms of sovereignty and self-determination of peoples along ethnic, religious, ideological, and linguistic lines now makes the idea of territorial transfer via warfare nearly incomprehensible in any rational economic or cultural sense. The transfer of material resources, manufacturing wealth, and population-based rural productivity via warfare is no longer profitable, as it demonstrably was in European international orders past.<sup>18</sup> If a ruler today tried to act like Napoleon or Frederick the Great by “grabbing territory,” he or she almost immediately would face—among members of the nationalistic population who identify culturally, ideologically, and economically with their own society—a highly motivated, hateful, rebellious enemy citizenry or “ready-made insurgency.”

In particular, a key part of the US triumph over communism in the Cold War involved the production of a seemingly ingrained, durable, and lasting transnational socioeconomic class with cultural implications. These global elites speak the same professional language of business and high finance, can translate pervasive demands for internal products and resources into a domestically understood local cultural idiom, and can transform local mores and customs regarding money, trade, and information exchange into the globalized, Westernized language of commerce.<sup>19</sup> This general, universal dynamic is already strongly evident—and growing—in Chinese society, in which “new wealth barons” and a rising middle class spur and sustain the continued growth of higher-education systems based on the Western model.<sup>20</sup>

Granted, high levels of general-deterrence stability among major powers exist worldwide. Nevertheless, clashes in strategic perceptions, political ideologies, and territorial claims can still very much matter at the regional level, for several reasons. First, there is a lack of domestic, elite cultural commonality among very disparate sovereign leadership circles within the major or rising powers of the twenty-first century, accompanied by little shared strategic culture on issues of war, peace, interests, attitudes, and perceptions. Brazil, India, China, Russia, South Africa, Turkey, and any other possible rising power do not share the same domestic cultural histories, the same conflict histories at a geopolitical level, or the same experience with domestic politics and the formation of strategic elites over time. This is true because none of them shares completely the same region, with the partial exception of Asian and Eurasian overlaps in contiguity between Russia and China as well as China and India. Second, in ways similar to those of old European international systems, rising powers all harbor some level of nationalist-based territorial claims based on legacy disputes in which the identity of peoples overlaps with swaths of disputed territory.<sup>21</sup> Third, and finally, the latter leads to the paradox that, although the value of territorial conquest in economic terms has become almost nil due to the transnational and international nature of capital, labor, and manufacturing assets, the value of territory in nationalist terms (i.e., domestic identity) has absolutely skyrocketed.<sup>22</sup> The United States therefore faces a subtle geopolitical equation in the Asia-Pacific: a reality wherein both countries are in general strategic accord at the level of the globalized socioeconomic order but where both may have value-based disagreements at the regional level of political stakes.

For instance, in regard to China, one Japanese scholar and policy analyst has argued that in the 1990s, “the government needed nationalism for national integrity, leadership consolidation, and legitimacy, and prevention of what they saw as negative Western influence upon the minds of the people.”<sup>23</sup> As a direct result, today “China’s rise has imbued the public with self-confidence, which interacts with China’s remaining sense of inferiority and is expressed in the form of aggressive



nationalism. . . . The economic rise of China has provided the basis on which a sentiment of love for and pride in the Chinese nation has grown notably since the mid-1990s.”<sup>24</sup> Chinese leadership, for example, has

step[ped] up . . . “patriotic education” in August 1994 [by distributing] . . . the *Guidelines for Implementing Patriotic Education* . . . [to reinforce] the power of national integrity . . . [by] uniting people of all ethnicities. . . . Since the late 1990s[, in short, the domestic political and developmental goal of Chinese leaders] has been “The Great Revival of the Chinese Nation.” . . .

. . . [For instance,] Jiang [Zemin] stated that the purpose of such education is to “ . . . prevent the rise of the worship of the West.”

. . . Methods of patriotic education included designating museums and relics as “patriotic education bases,” and making patriotic thoughts the main theme of society by creating a social atmosphere in which “people can be infected and permeated with patriotic thought and spirit any time, any place, in all aspects of daily life.” This was to be achieved by utilizing contemporary media, including newspapers, journals, radio, television and films.<sup>25</sup>

Given such nationalist sentiments and accompanying territorial disputes regarding Taiwan and the South China Sea, the United States seeks to deter any strategic expansion of Chinese political interests and military capabilities in ways that could undermine South Korean, Japanese, and Southeast Asian nations’ sovereign economic and political security. In this regard, how Beijing treats Taipei, including use of coercive diplomacy backed by military exercises, deployments, and threats, is increasingly becoming an implicit bellwether for how the People’s Republic of China (PRC) may treat its other neighbors in the future as it grows financially and technologically. Equally, however, the United States does not want to create in the PRC’s mind a threat of radical expansion of Japanese military and political power in the present or future Asian balance since such fears could spark arms races, again undermining the prosperity flowing from a globalized system. Finally, neither the PRC nor the United States (nor Asian friends and

allies) wants Taiwan's leaders to create an unhelpful international precedent of unilateral declarations of political autonomy.<sup>26</sup>

In this environment, the populations of important East Asian powers such as Japan and South Korea are, in essence, "sitting on a fence." Their economies have become so interlinked with China's that one Japanese international relations scholar opined that

the Japanese economy was lifted by the rapid growth of demand in the Chinese market, and in Japan the economic threat of China is hardly talked about any more. In 2004, China became the largest trading partner of not only Japan, but also South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam. In 2004, for the first time in post-World War II history China surpassed the United States as Japan's largest trading partner.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, according to one comprehensive RAND study of Asian elite and popular attitudes, interests, and security perceptions vis-à-vis the United States and China, no country wants to be the party to "buck" the status quo by becoming entangled in disputes between the PRC and its neighbors or the PRC and the United States. Further, no country wishes to jeopardize its prosperity by undertaking a more explicit and expanded East Asian military role. That said, the same RAND analysis showed that the popular viewpoints of foreign policy issues among the populations and leadership circles of both countries could "swing" if tension, pressures, or threats escalate in any one direction—and if the PRC seems to become more bellicose and assertive.<sup>28</sup>

All of this points to a deceptively simple fact: US political and territorial conflicts of interest with China are innately partial or limited in scope, not total. For example, although the United States, China, and Taiwan do not share a single "strategic culture" at the elite or popular level as to norms about the uses of force, none of them is interested in upsetting the complex financial, manufacturing, and trade ties that have evolved among all three sides, and none wants to cause an escalation to all-out warfare. Instead, the threat from China will likely take the form of demands for relatively limited or partial geopolitical gains. As put by the US Air Force's own Center for Strategy and Technology,

“Significant Chinese force projection beyond Southeast Asia will be difficult” even though “China’s military will be sufficient to deter and even repel almost any attempt at preemptive action against its mainland or territories or in its immediate vicinity.”<sup>29</sup> Instead of true “global reach” as defined by the United States, the service’s research team concluded that “China’s military capability will be greatest from the mainland out to the ‘second island chain’—the region extending south and east from Japan to Guam in the Western Pacific.”<sup>30</sup> In terms of actual operational military patterns, it determined that “as a regional air and naval power, China will routinely cruise these waters with its carrier strike groups.”<sup>31</sup> The ultimate political strategic goal of the PRC, then, would not be “policing the global commons” but policing the regional commons: “China will seek to assume the role of guarantor of the sea lines of communication in the region, including the strategic Straits [*sic*] of Malacca. They will also be capable of selectively impeding [regional] commerce if they choose.”<sup>32</sup>

Given these myriad complexities, it behooves us to ask whether certain aspects of traditional notions of offensive strategic interdiction would serve the United States well in future disputes with this Asian rising power. As Clausewitz pointed out 180 years ago, the political aims of limited war require a different application of force than do wars of unconditional capitulation.

## Back to the Future: Clausewitz and Limited War between Major Powers

*It follows, too, that war can be a matter of degree.*

—Clausewitz, *On War*

One could summarize Clausewitz’s most basic theoretical argument in one dictum of particular importance for today’s US joint force structure: military leaders should not fight wars with limited political stakes as if they are “absolute” wars over unlimited political goals. Or in his

own words, “Obviously, wars waged by both sides to the full extent of their national strength must be conducted on different principles from wars in which policy was based on the comparative size of the regular armies.”<sup>33</sup> In his own day, Clausewitz consistently made the empirical observation that, beyond the continent-spanning, revolutionary, highly ideological, and idealist “absolute wars” of Napoleonic France, most wars were fought between major powers that did *not* necessarily harbor any grand designs against the international system itself:

Only with the rise of Bonaparte have there been campaigns . . . where superiority has consistently led to the enemy's collapse. Before his time, every campaign had ended with the winning side attempting to reach a state of balance in which it could maintain itself. At that point, the progress of victory stopped. . . . This culminating point in victory is bound to recur in every future war in which the destruction of the enemy cannot be the military aim, and this will presumably be true of most wars [between great powers].

If one were to go beyond this point, it would not merely be a *useless* effort which could not add to [political] success. It would in fact be a *damaging* one, which would lead to a reaction [from the enemy]; and . . . such reactions usually have completely disproportionate effects.<sup>34</sup> (emphases in original).

Thus, in terms of what we now call the tactical and operational levels of war, or what Clausewitz referred to as the “engagement” and “campaign,” respectively, he argued that “an attacker can overshoot the point at which, if he stopped and assumed the defensive, there would still be a chance of success—that is, of equilibrium. It is therefore important to calculate this point correctly when planning the campaign. An attacker may otherwise take on more than he can manage and, as it were, get into debt.”<sup>35</sup>

But Clausewitz's life's work did not start out with notions of purposefully constrained offensives, a reality that often confuses the debate. In the beginning sections and chapters of *On War*, Clausewitz initially seemed to verify the main threads in Jominian reasoning—that is, the collapsing of the tactical-combat, operational-battle, and military-strate-

gic levels into one grand military-political level of action and deed, thought, and decision making:

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

Theory . . . has the duty to give priority to the absolute form of war and to make that form a general point of reference, so that he who wants to learn from theory becomes accustomed to keeping that point in view constantly, to measuring all his hopes and fears by it, and to approximating it *when he can or when he must*.<sup>36</sup> (emphases in original)

Ultimately, though, Clausewitz was not content merely to describe this already-popular mode of thought, epitomized by historical colleague Jomini in his claims of having reached an objective theory of war. Instead, Clausewitz felt obliged and compelled to critique it severely, based on his own quite extensive wartime experience in command of Prussian forces in the counteroffensives against Napoleon. Indeed, the main difference between them—and a crucial one for air and sea power debates today—is that Jomini’s “theory of war” was, in fact, a detailed discourse on “grand tactics” or what we may today call the “theater-strategic” level of war, which simply assumed the goal of complete military disarming of the enemy at the outset.<sup>37</sup> In marked contrast, Clausewitz, in bringing in the idea of political stakes, truly was writing an overarching theory of war-as-a-whole, at all levels of decision making. In ways that bear on today’s airpower debates concerning United States–China competition, Clausewitz launched his own real-time, intellectual counteroffensive against Jominian thinking in two major sections titled “Modifications in Practice” and “War Does Not Consist of a Single Short Blow”:

Would this [total military effort in one giant battle] ever be the case in practice? Yes, it would if: (a) war were a wholly isolated act, occurring suddenly and not produced by previous events in the political world; (b) it consisted of a single decisive act or a set of simultaneous ones; (c) the decision achieved was complete and perfect in itself, uninfluenced by any previous estimate of the political situation it would bring about.<sup>38</sup>

Naturally, Clausewitz here sets up three conditions probably impossible to realize concretely in the political world, but he does so in a way that aptly describes in three short points the basic underlying assumptions of Jominian theorizing.<sup>39</sup> In the end, Clausewitz disagreed with not only the simultaneity of large military battles, single combats, or several concurrent campaigns in a purely technological sense (arguably, something that is now achievable with modern technologies), but also the popular military-planning assumption that political decision makers would be so hasty and war hungry as to sign onto such offensive schemes at all times, in all wars. As Clausewitz cautioned military leaders in his own period,

The interaction of the two sides [enemies] tends to fall short of maximum effort. Their full resources will therefore not be mobilized immediately. . . .

. . . It is contrary to human nature to make an extreme effort, and the tendency therefore is always to plead that a decision may be possible later on. . . .

Warfare thus eludes the strict theoretical requirement that extremes of force be applied.<sup>40</sup>

In turn, Clausewitz argued that this inevitable feature of most wars was due to the political stakes involved between the two sides, as well as the very diffuse nature of military strength, the latter of which by definition would never become completely mobilized at any given moment, given the rise of modern nationalism: “The resources in question are *the fighting forces proper, the country*, with its physical features and population, and its *allies*. The country—its physical features and population—is more than just the source of all armed forces proper; it is in itself an integral element among the factors at work in war” (emphases in original).<sup>41</sup>

In essence, Clausewitz was clearly wending his way towards a complex theory of warfare that did not allow for one simple, linear, and fixed definition of terms such as *military object*, *victory*, or *objective and decisive points* at the strategic level of military planning. For instance, once having admitted that the population itself was a factor in warfare—as Napoleonic wars and revolutions had amply demonstrated

throughout a highly nationalistic Europe—one had to acknowledge that the question of mobilization would introduce not only “total wars” of absolute offensives but also “limited wars” based on the mood and needs of the populations themselves, as interpreted by central decision makers. Thus, one could not assume that an adversary (or one’s self) who possessed a large army and a firm plan for a major offensive thrust in a giant battle would necessarily use all of that force in (1) the war overall or, equally, (2) in one humongous, clash-of-wills battle based on totally destructive combat.<sup>42</sup>

In Clausewitz’s view, if grassroots popular will were left to its own devices, the masses of one’s population, ruled by “passions,” would prefer to fight a Napoleonic battle and a Napoleonic war that knew no political or military boundaries or limits.<sup>43</sup> However, masses and passions do not often directly make high-level strategic policy, a point that Clausewitz attempted to drive home: “Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object [as seen by political leaders], the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in *magnitude* and also in *duration*. Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow” (emphases in original).<sup>44</sup>

Thus, because political goals are partial in an international system in which major powers held interests not only in dispute but also in common, political leaders (statesmen) would likely want to feel their way forward during a crisis. They would test with one set of combats or engagements to see the opponent’s response and then reformulate military intentions and plans along the way, with the “political object” in sight at each tit-for-tat iteration during hostilities. Again, as Clausewitz put it, “If war consisted of one decisive act, or of a set of simultaneous decisions [as Jomini portrays], preparations would tend toward totality, for no omission could ever be rectified. . . . But if the decision in war consists of several successive acts, then each of them, seen in context, will provide a gauge for those that follow.”<sup>45</sup>

Political decision makers are so cautious, not because of an irrational or overly sensitive fear of using military force to its full potential but because of the near-chronic uncertainty about adversary goals, intentions, and strength or intensity of political will over any given issue in dispute. An anarchic international system that purposefully and closely guards secrets about such variables virtually guarantees the latter.<sup>46</sup> Again, Clausewitz—long before the advent of political science terminologies about “power balances” and “anarchy”—presciently drew out the existence and implications of this kind of political-level uncertainty:

If you want to overcome your enemy you must match your effort against his power of resistance, which can be expressed as the product of two inseparable factors, viz. *the total means at his disposal* and *the strength of his will*. . . . But the strength of his will is much less easy to determine [than his available means] and can only be gauged approximately by the strength of the motive animating it. Assuming you arrive in this way at a reasonably accurate estimate of the enemy's power of resistance, you can adjust your efforts accordingly. . . .

One could [for example] . . . conceive of a state of balance in which the side with the positive aim (the side with the stronger grounds for action) was the one that had the weaker forces. The balance would then result from the combined effects of aim and strength.<sup>47</sup> (emphases in original)

The key phrase in this quotation is, “Assuming you arrive in this way at a reasonably accurate estimate of the enemy's power of resistance,” the latter of which depends upon, as Clausewitz notes, a complex combination of both the adversary's means and the “strength of his will.” Given that a haze almost always surrounds the second factor in this equation, it should come as no surprise to Air Force planners that US politicians often fail to live up to the dictates and expectations of traditional airpower theory. The following point of Clausewitz's bears repeating: “But if the decision in war consists of several successive acts, then each of them, seen in context, will provide a gauge for those that follow.” Due to the need to assess the enemy's strength of will, it is exactly this incremental decision-making method that has nearly always defined the political approach to the use of force against peer competitors. Barring the completely certain intelligence of political will or the



wars of ideological genocide carried out by obvious megalomaniacs such as Adolf Hitler, it probably always will.

Here, Clausewitz represents a firm philosophical body of thought separate from the more purist versions of offensive strategic interdiction—specifically, his recognition that, in warfare between major powers, *disarming the enemy* could mean an infinite number of physical realities, depending upon the opponent's strength of will, which in turn would directly relate to the political aims sought:

We can now see that in war many roads lead to success, and that they do not all involve the opponent's outright defeat. They range from *the destruction of the enemy's forces, the conquest of his territory, to a temporary occupation or invasion, to projects with an immediate political purpose, and finally to passively awaiting the enemy's attacks* [emphasis in original]. *Any one of these may be used to overcome the enemy's will* [emphasis added]: the choice depends on [political] circumstances.<sup>48</sup>

This political definition of war and victory potentially runs contrary not only to early offensive airpower theorists in the 1920s and 1930s (the Air Corps Tactical School) but also to the primary mode of thought of Air Force policy makers since that time. The latter have overwhelmingly emphasized offensive strategic interdiction of key socioeconomic and military-supporting centers of gravity via quick parallel attacks on linked target sets, all towards the purpose of total victory or defeat of the enemy.<sup>49</sup> Specifically, Clausewitz argued that there could never be one schema or conceptual framework for decisive, low-cost, offensive victory in battle that would always equal both military victory and political victory at a strategic level of decision making. In the end, it depended upon the political war being fought, as represented in each side's demands of the opponent after military defeat—with the demands themselves determining what the concept of “defeat” actually would mean in final physical terms:

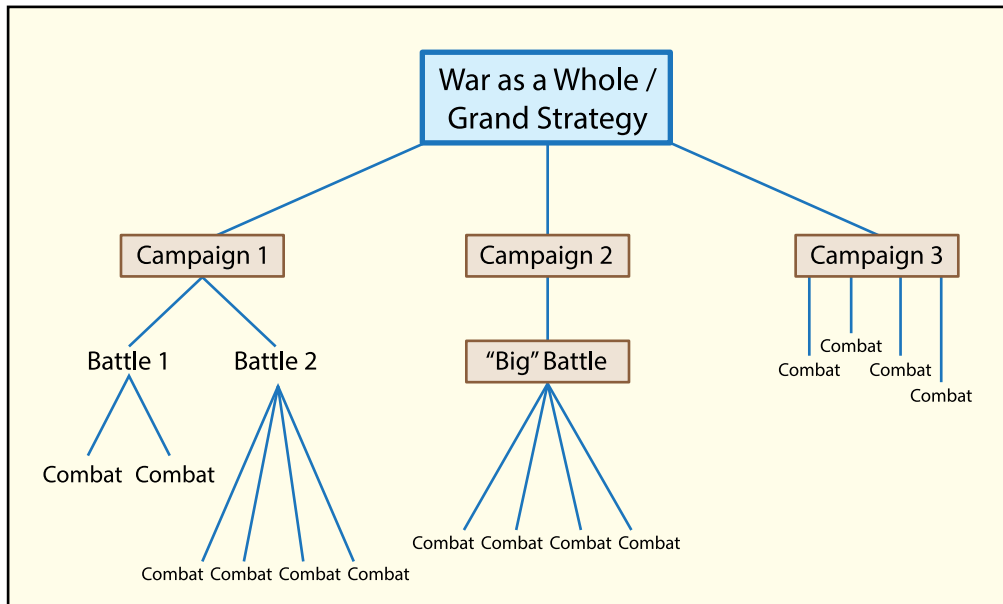
When we attack the enemy, it is one thing if we mean our first operation to be followed by others until all resistance has been broken; it is quite another if our aim is only to obtain a single victory, in order to make the enemy insecure, to impress our greater strength upon him, and to give

him doubts about his future. If that is the extent of our aim, we will employ no more strength than is absolutely necessary.<sup>50</sup>

In Clausewitz's mind, no such typology as "routine" attacks (what some Air Force verbiage tends to disparage as "attrition warfare") versus "special" attacks (what twentieth-century military theorist J. F. C. Fuller dubbed "brain warfare") could exist.<sup>51</sup> Rather, attacks would be less or more useful, depending upon political goals. As Clausewitz argued, in regards to the European continental flurry to adopt the "objective" French way of war,

the French are always writing about *guerre d'invasion* [italics in original]. What they understand by it is any attack that penetrates deep into enemy territory, and they would like if possible to establish its meaning as the opposite of a routine attack—that is, one that merely nibbles at a frontier. . . . [But] whether an attack will halt at the frontier or penetrate into the heart of the enemy's territory [emphasis added], whether its main concern is to seize the enemy's fortresses or to seek out the core of enemy resistance and pursue it relentlessly, is not a matter than depends on form [technologies, doctrine]: it depends on [political] circumstances. Theory, at least, permits no other answer.<sup>52</sup>

So, Clausewitz was already arguing during his lifetime (in direct response to Jomini as well as many practicing military colleagues in Europe) about an idea increasingly lost in both theorizing and concrete military planning in the immediate post-Napoleonic era.<sup>53</sup> This notion held that, although tactical combats and engagements needed to be well planned and decisive in and of themselves, ultimately they were merely ingredients in larger battles. The latter, in turn, could be part of very different macrolevel military strategies in service to the policy goals of war. That is, any given engagement and any given battle could itself be part of larger, more extensive campaigns of strategic offense or strategic defense over protracted periods, spread out over many separate fronts between two adversaries, together adding up to the grand strategic level of the war as a whole (see figure).



**Figure. Mapping Clausewitz's "levels of warfare"**

With this in mind, it is hard to refute Clausewitz's characterization of a full-scale war between actual peer competitors at the great-power level:

If a state with its fighting forces is thought of as a single unit, a war will naturally tend to be seen in terms of a single great engagement [in accordance with the arguments of Jomini]. . . . But our wars today consist of a large number of engagements, great and small, simultaneous or consecutive, and this fragmentation of activity into so many separate actions is the result of the great variety of situations out of which wars can nowadays arise.

Even the ultimate aim of contemporary warfare, the political object, cannot always be seen as a single issue. Even if it were, action is subject to such a multitude of conditions and considerations that the aim can no longer be achieved by a single tremendous act of war. Rather it must be reached by a large number of more or less important actions, all combined into one whole.<sup>54</sup>

Again, it is important to point out *why* Clausewitz argues that war consists of different levels of decision and different types of planning. One might argue that much of this early theorizing is no longer relevant because it was so inextricably based on the reality of “land war” and crude offensive technologies of the time. However, this would be misreading. Clearly, Clausewitz argues that war is nearly always a halting, hesitant, and mixed beast, not because of technology or terrain but because of politics, both domestic and international: “This fragmentation of activity into so many separate actions is the result of the great variety of situations out of which wars can nowadays arise.”<sup>55</sup> The word *situations* does not mean simply different technologies or terrain but different political contexts.

## Amending Notions of “Victory” in Wars of Limited Aims between Major Powers

Eventually, Clausewitz prescribed a different approach to “victory” in cases of “limited wars” between peer great-power competitors, which he saw as emerging from partial, rather than total, conflicts of interest with the adversary. In interstate disputes based on only partially conflicting values or material goals, the parties could skillfully use individually decisive (tactical) “engagements” or combats towards rather less decisive, less definitive campaigns and the overall war as a whole. By the end of his unfinished tome, Clausewitz had begun to delineate a type of warfare so limited in political goals that military means and military objects would also, in tandem, become directly influenced and indeed severely constrained in their employment against the adversary—at least at an operational or a campaign, if not tactical, level of fighting:

Suppose one merely wants a small concession from the enemy. One will only fight until some modest *quid pro quo* [italics in original] has been acquired, and a moderate effort should suffice for that.

. . . Neither side makes more than minimal moves, and neither feels itself seriously threatened.

Once this influence of the political objective on war is admitted, as it must be, there is no stopping it; consequently we must also be willing to wage such minimal wars, which consist in *merely threatening the enemy*, with *negotiations held in reserve*.<sup>56</sup> (emphases in original)

That is, one *could* choose the destruction of the adversary at a strategic political level via disarming his entire military machine alongside, perhaps, pure “punishment” strikes meant to wear down the populace. Both of the latter would argue for decisive, offensive, campaign-level invasions of the adversary’s territory and attacks on his strategic “objective points.” Alternatively, one could choose to let the opponent strike first and bear those costs via mounting a purely strategic defense, even as one’s own combats and battles themselves would have mainly offensive characteristics at a lower level of action and military decision making:

What do we mean by the defeat of the enemy? Simply the destruction of his forces . . . either completely or enough to make him stop fighting. . . .

Engagements mean fighting. The object of fighting is the destruction or defeat of the enemy. The enemy in the individual engagement is simply the opposing fighting force. . . .

. . . The complete or partial destruction of the enemy must be regarded as the sole object of all engagements. . . .

. . . By direct destruction we mean tactical success. We maintain therefore that only great tactical successes can lead to great strategic ones. . . . Tactical successes are of *paramount importance* in war.<sup>57</sup> (emphasis in original)

As one can see, therefore, Clausewitz’s focus on the “strategic defense” in wars of “limited objects” did not derive at all from military passivity at the level of counterposed forces in the battlespace. We must not confuse his argument for strategic defensive wars of limited aims with some claim that all wars should be fought halfheartedly or, perhaps more accurately, that individual combats or “engagements” should be lacking in offensive fervor and results. Clausewitz clearly states, repeatedly across separate chapters, that one core thread binds all military and political planning together—the destruction of an adversary’s fighting forces at the lowest tactical or operational level.

So much then for the ends . . . in war; let us now turn to the means.

There is only one: *combat* [emphasis in original]. However many forms combat takes, however far it may be removed from the brute discharge of hatred and enmity of a physical encounter, however many forces may intrude which themselves are not part of fighting, it is inherent in the very concept of war that everything that occurs *must originally derive from combat* [emphasis in original].

. . . *Whenever armed forces, that is armed individuals* [emphasis in original], are used, the idea of combat must be present. . . .

. . . *The fact that only one means exists constitutes a strand that runs through the entire web of military activity and really holds it together* [emphasis added].<sup>58</sup>

Or in sum, “It would be a fundamental error to imagine that a negative [defensive] aim implies a preference for a bloodless decision over the destruction of the enemy. . . . Everything is governed by a supreme law, the *decision by force of arms*. If the opponent does seek battle, this recourse can never be denied him” (emphasis in original).<sup>59</sup>

The key to understanding Clausewitz on this score, in short, involves separating the tactical from operational (campaign) and strategic (policy) levels of both decision making and actions in war. Much of classic and even contemporary airpower theory concerns the necessity of melding or fusing all such levels together to allow for the revolutionary, victory-delivering effects of parallel and simultaneous strikes against all parts of the adversary’s war machine. Clausewitz is saying, however, that in wars of limited policy aims, since one does not seek all-out victory against the adversary, striking behind the front lines may actually cause an escalation one does not even want. That is, if we do not wish to literally occupy an enemy (as in Germany and Japan in 1945, Kosovo in 1999, or Iraq in 2003), why do we want to collapse his entire economic, war-supporting “system” or “organization”? Instead, one might, for political reasons, want to wage brutal combat within a purposefully constrained battlespace along the frontiers of each side’s outer perimeters (i.e., the outer limits of each side’s spheres of power projection):

What is the concept of defense? The parrying of a blow. . . . A campaign is defensive if we wait for our theater of operations to be invaded. . . . In other words, our [operational] offensive takes place within our own positions or theater of operations. . . . But if we are really waging war, we must return the enemy's blows. . . . So the defensive form of war is not a simple shield, but a shield made up of well-directed blows.<sup>60</sup>

Putting all of this together, one uses combined offensive-defensive campaigns (operational level of decision making) via offensive combats within well-ordered engagements of enemy forces (tactical level) to serve a larger military and political strategy of denial of enemy aims during a crisis or limited war (strategic level). According to Clausewitz, "The second question is how to influence the enemy's expenditure of effort; in other words, how to make the war more costly to him. The enemy's expenditure of effort consists in the *wastage of his forces*—our *destruction* of them" (emphases in original).<sup>61</sup> He then refers to this defensive form of war (at a level of campaigns) as one with a "negative aim" in which "victory" simply means that the opponent does not himself win: "If a negative aim—that is, the use of every means available for pure resistance—gives an advantage in war, the advantage need only be enough to *balance* any superiority the opponent may possess: in the end his political object will not seem worth the effort it costs" (emphasis in original).<sup>62</sup> Thus, one uses very clear offensive victories at the level of combats and engagements to serve a more defensive campaign and war goal of "balancing" the adversary's fighting power, making his objectives costly or perhaps even impossible to achieve.

## When Offensive Strategic Interdiction Is Not an Option

In a US-PRC crisis over any imaginable geopolitical issue, whether Taiwan's status or the South China Sea's mineral, oil, gas, and military navigation issues, US political leaders probably will need offensive force options at a tactical and perhaps even operational (campaign) level of planning. However, we must funnel all such offensive combats towards strategically defensive political goals, in which diplomats will

not want to disarm and defeat China but bargain for new issue settlements that leave the overall Asian balance of power in place for the most part. Therefore, in any future great-power crisis in the Asia-Pacific theater, rather than think in terms of offensive parallel operations involving simultaneous strikes meant to degrade the enemy's ability to communicate with (or command) his forces in the field, US decision makers would likely proceed along the lines of Clausewitz's description of political-military linkages:

Thus there are many reasons why the purpose of an engagement may not be the destruction of the enemy's forces, the forces immediately confronting us. Destruction may be merely a means to some other end. In such a case, total destruction has ceased to be the point; the engagement is nothing but a *trial of strength*. In itself it is of no value; its significance lies in the outcome of the trial.<sup>63</sup> (emphasis in original)

The simple truth is that in a world of rising powers defined by complex interdependence, neither side will be particularly interested in completely disarming the other. In a limited war, the United States eventually may want to denude Chinese capacities for power projection in its near abroad, but US decision makers almost certainly will not want to treat China as it did Japan during World War II—or Saddam in 2003 or Milošević in 1999 in Kosovo Province—by forcing China to retreat from positions on its own internationally recognized sovereign territory. Instead, politically likely offensive and defensive actions will occur in China's near abroad over issues that do not entail regime change or complete capitulation. Thus, with these partially competitive and partially cooperative aspects of US-China relations well in mind, smart military planners today will indeed focus their efforts on the reality of incremental, halting, and “fragmented” political edicts during the protracted course of a given crisis or conflict in the Asia-Pacific. Ultimately this means planning for campaigns and wars defined as “defense by denial of enemy aims.” ★



## Notes

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3. Meilinger, *10 Propositions*, 8–19, 28–40.
4. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 81.
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6. See, for instance, Henriksen, *NATO's Gamble*, 40–41.
7. Specifically, see Clausewitz, *On War*, 601–2, 614–15.
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42. One infers these broad points from his argumentation (*ibid.*, 87–89).

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