

EVALUATING THE MASTERS OF STRATEGY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CLAUSEWITZ, SUN TZU, MAHAN, AND CORBETT

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Abstract – This paper provides a brief overview of major inter-theoretical relationships between the works of Carl von Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, Alfred Mahan, and Julian Corbett. Specifically, it undertakes a comparative analysis of these authors’ writings on the nature of war; the use of theory in the study of warfare; the primacy of politics; limited and absolute war; the principle of decisive battle; the principle of concentration; the role of the people in war; friction, uncertainty, and the means to overcome these problems; and the offence and defence in war.

Introduction

Carl von Clausewitz’s *On War* and Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* are firmly established as the two dominant theoretical works of strategic thought.¹ Despite common assumptions that these works embody fundamentally incompatible perspectives on strategic thought, they, along with the writings of Alfred Mahan and Julian Corbett, both challenge and complement each other in several notable ways.² This paper provides a brief overview of these inter-theoretical relationships. Specifically, this paper undertakes a comparative analysis of these authors’ writings on the nature of war; the use of theory in the study of warfare; the primacy of politics; limited and absolute war; the principle of decisive battle; the principle of concentration; the role of the people in war; friction, uncertainty, and the means to overcome these problems; and the offence and defence in war.

The Nature of War

Clausewitz defines war as an “act of force to compel our enemy to do our will,” the object of which is the disarmament or, if necessary, destruction of the enemy’s armed forces.³ This definition emphasizes the centrality of combat, which, for Clausewitz, is what separates war from other human pursuits. Clausewitz emphasizes the central importance of combat throughout *On War*. For example, he describes war as “a clash between major interests, which is resolved by bloodshed – that is the only way in which it differs from other conflicts.”⁴ Similarly, he summarizes that “war is fighting, for fighting is the only effective principle in the manifold activities generally designated as war.”⁵ The scholar also emphasizes the interactive nature of war as the collision between two living forces: “war is not an exercise of the will directed at

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989) and Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Ralph Sawyer (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994).

² Alfred Mahan, *The Influence of Seapower upon History: 1660-1783* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1957) and Julian Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1988).

³ Clausewitz, 75 and 258.

⁴ Clausewitz, 149.

⁵ Clausewitz, 127.

inanimate matter.... In war, the will is directed at an animate object that *reacts*.”⁶ Essentially, in Clausewitz’s theory of war, governments mandate, citizens pay for, and soldiers are charged with carrying out organized slaughter of their human foes.

Not dissimilar to Clausewitz, Sun Tzu characterizes war as “the greatest affair of state, the basis of life and death, the Way (Tao) to survival or extinction.”⁷ The authors share a belief that the purpose of war is to compel one’s enemies to submit to one’s will, a respect for the inherent human cost of war, and a belief in a role for combat and the destruction of enemy forces.⁸ However, Sun Tzu also considers the nature of warfare to be deception and considers the highest object in war to be compelling the enemy to submit to one’s will without fighting: “attaining one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the pinnacle of excellence. Subjugating the enemy’s army without fighting is the true pinnacle of excellence.”⁹ Reinforcing this, Sun Tzu states plainly that “the highest realization of warfare is to attack the enemy’s plans; next is to attack their alliances; next to attack their army; and the lowest is to attack their fortified cities.”¹⁰ These statements reflect Sun Tzu’s comparatively broad approach to war, positing that war is more than merely a series of bloody battles, but rather a phenomenon wherein diplomacy, espionage, knowledge of geography, and other non-violent elements are equally if not more important than Clausewitz’s preferred emphasis on martial combat.¹¹

Mahan considers war to be “simply a political movement, though violent and exceptional in character.”¹² Though once again sharing an emphasis on combat, Mahan employs a broader approach and posits that the nature of warfare is fundamentally tied to promoting seaborne commerce, access to overseas markets, and the pursuit of wealth. In *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, he writes of “The clash of interests, the angry feelings roused by conflicting attempts thus to appropriate the larger share, if not the whole, of the advantages of commerce, and of distant unsettled commercial regions, led to war.”¹³ In order to protect global commerce and ensure the flow of wealth generating goods, Mahan considers “command of the sea” the supreme objective of maritime warfare.¹⁴ He states plainly that “the due use and control of the sea is but one link in the chain of exchange by which wealth accumulates; but it is the central link.”¹⁵ Command of the sea, the expression of sea power, in turn, requires strong naval power based around a large blue water fleet. Yet a large coal, oil, or gas burning fleet depends on the same distant stations and overseas bases that the fleet itself was tasked with protecting. Therefore, generating the sea power necessary to create wealth from seaborne commerce is, in Mahan’s perspective, also the means to generate sufficient wealth to maintain strong sea power.

Much like Sun Tzu, Corbett employs a broad approach to warfare, which focuses on the combative nature of war but also diplomatic alliances, coalitions formed before and during a war, and the economic and financial dimensions of warfare. The object of naval warfare, in Corbett’s perspective, is to establish control over maritime communications for both military and

⁶ Clausewitz, 77 and 149.

⁷ Sun Tzu, 167.

⁸ Sun Tzu, 168 and 197.

⁹ Sun Tzu, 168.

¹⁰ Sun Tzu, 177.

¹¹ Sun Tzu, 223 and 231-2.

¹² Alfred Mahan, *Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future* (Boston, MA: Little-Brown, 1897): 177-180.

¹³ Mahan, *The Influence of Seapower upon History*, 1.

¹⁴ William Livezey, *Mahan on Seapower* (Oklahoma City, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 52.

¹⁵ Mahan, *The Influence of Seapower upon History*, 225-26.

commercial purposes.¹⁶ Also like Sun Tzu, Corbett places equal if not greater emphasis on the deceptive nature of warfare. Indeed, he calls for “an appearance of weakness that covers a reality of strength.”¹⁷ Unlike Mahan, who arguably considers maritime warfare to be the paramount form of warfare, Corbett’s writings reflect a greater respect for Clausewitz’s theories of land warfare. As Corbett puts it, “it scarcely needs saying that it is almost impossible that a war can be decided by naval action alone.”¹⁸ Moreover, Corbett argues that, “Since men live upon the land and not upon the sea, great issues between nations at war have always been decided – except in the rarest cases – either by what your army can do against your enemy’s territory and national life or else by the fear of what the fleet makes it possible for your army to do.”¹⁹ Consistent with this thinking, Corbett reasons that absolute command of the sea was virtually impossible and unnecessary for the conduct of war.²⁰ Through this, and his emphasis on supporting diplomacy, commerce raiding, and amphibious operations, he stresses the inherent limited nature of maritime warfare and the supporting role that sea power must play for land power.

The Use of Theory in the Study of Warfare

The stated purpose of *On War* is to educate the minds of young officer cadets studying at military academies. Clausewitz believes that the most important skill for young officers was deliberation, the ability to think, not the ability to execute strategy. Unlike Jomini, Clausewitz thought it foolish to try to codify rigid principles of war for he felt that theory could not equip the mind with formulas to solve problems. He intends others to use theory in the study of warfare, not to rely on theory to tell them precisely what to do: “it is meant to educate the mind of the future commander, or, more accurately, to guide him in his self-education; not accompany him to the battlefield.”²¹ For Clausewitz, theory is clearly essential:

Theory will have fulfilled its main task when it is used to analyze the constituent elements of war, to distinguish precisely what at first sight seems fused, to explain in full the properties of the means employed and to show their probable effect, to define clearly the nature of the ends in view and to illuminate all phases of warfare in a thorough critical enquiry. Theory then becomes a guide to anyone who wants to learn about war from books; it will light his way, ease his progress, train his judgment, and help him avoid pitfalls.²²

Sun Tzu understood the purpose of theory quite differently. Indeed, while Clausewitz warned against relying on theorists who risk “stamping out war plans as from a kind of truth machine,” Sun Tzu routinely plays the role of truth machine in his writings.²³ The Chinese scholar does indeed instruct his readers to utilize theory by making “a comparative evaluation through estimations,” which includes, for example, comparing the strength and training of the

¹⁶ Corbett, *Some Principles*, Part 2, Chapter 1, “Theory of the Object: Command of the Sea.”

¹⁷ Corbett, *Some Principles*, 152 and 206.

¹⁸ Corbett, *Some Principles*, 12.

¹⁹ Corbett, *Some Principles*, 12.

²⁰ Corbett, *Some Principles*, 91.

²¹ Clausewitz, 141.

²² Clausewitz, 141.

²³ Clausewitz, 168.

opposing forces. However, he is remarkably Jomenian in his belief that, “If a general follows my (methods for) estimation and you employ him, he will certainly be victorious and you should retain him.”²⁴ Elsewhere in *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu provides numerous directives about what a commander must do when engaging enemy forces, navigating unfamiliar terrain, managing information warfare and logistics, and several other military tasks.²⁵ Throughout, he retains an air of certain victory so long as commanders follow his theoretical maxims. As a result, for a work heralded for its flexibility and adaptability, Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* is remarkably deterministic in its discussion of how theory should be utilized by aspiring commanders.

Following in the Jomenian tradition, Mahan neither offers nor demonstrates the same degree of confidence in the theoretical study of warfare that Sun Tzu or Clausewitz do. Mahan places greater emphasis on drawing principles from historical study than on the utility of abstract theoretical insight. His seminal work, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, reflects this focus. However, this broadly historical work is compatible with Clausewitz’s writings on the methods of acquiring military knowledge, with experience, theoretical inquiry, and historical study each providing valuable yet different insights.²⁶ Nonetheless, Mahan puts forward a comparatively limited theory of sea power and does not demonstrate the same degree of guidance on how to best utilize his theory or theory in general that Clausewitz does.²⁷

Finally, Corbett shares Clausewitz’s belief that theory should play a preeminent role in the study of warfare. Indeed, Corbett places great emphasis on the utility of theory for he conceives of it as a common language for discussing war and strategy. For Corbett, theory was:

a process by which we co-ordinate our ideas, define the meaning of the words we use, grasps the difference between essential and unessential factors, and fix and expose the fundamental data on which everyone is agreed. In this way we prepare the apparatus of practical discussion... Without such an apparatus no two men can even think on the same line; much less can they ever hope to detach the real point of difference that divides them and isolate it for quiet solution.²⁸

Corbett devised his work on strategy against the backdrop of the British Empire. In that context, achieving common ground through theory was particularly important as strategy was not made by a single individual but instead by large groups of people at numerous conferences held at different locations around the globe.²⁹ Corbett also agreed with Clausewitz that, because even the best theory of war is “not... a substitute for judgment and experience,” it cannot “systematize strategy into an exactly science.”³⁰ Moreover, both scholars lacked Sun Tzu’s confidence in the practical applicability of existing theory. Instead, they shared a belief that theory can only ascertain what is “normal,” while at the same time recognized that war in practice is continuously complex and uncertain and, ultimately, made up of deviations from the theoretical norm.³¹

²⁴ Sun Tzu, 168.

²⁵ Sun Tzu, 187, 197, 219, and 229.

²⁶ Clausewitz, 164.

²⁷ Colin Gray, *Modern Strategy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 80 and Mahan, 1-77.

²⁸ Corbett, *Some Principles*, 7-8.

²⁹ Martin Van Creveld, *The Art of War: War and Military Thought* (London, UK: Cassel, 2000), 151.

³⁰ Corbett, *Some Principles*, 10.

³¹ Corbett, *Some Principles*, 8-9 and Clausewitz, 168.

The Primacy of Politics

Perhaps the most widely acknowledged element of Clausewitz's *On War* is the author's clear subjugation of military affairs to the policies of the state. War is not fought for the purpose of winning battles; it is fought to achieve political ends. Clausewitz argues forcefully that "War is not a mere act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on by other means."³² Political authorities determine what the objectives of war are and what achieving a given objective is worth in terms of the military resources to be invested. Accordingly, war is not just one uncontrolled clash of all forces; instead, it is a calculated political decision that can range from minor engagements to the extreme use of force.³³ Therefore, victory and defeat cannot be judged in purely military terms, but rather they must be judged in terms of whether the political objective was achieved.³⁴ Clausewitz reinforces his belief in the primacy of politics in Book 8 of *On War* by stating that "war is only a branch of political activity; that it is in no sense autonomous."³⁵ Moreover, he argues that the onset of war does not suspend the intercourse between war and politics; rather, "the main lines along which military events progress, and to which they are restricted, are political lines that continue throughout the war into subsequent peace."³⁶ At all times, war and politics share an "indissoluble connection."³⁷

Sun Tzu also recognizes the primary of politics over military affairs and, in this respect, is quite similar to Clausewitz. As discussed above, Sun Tzu believes that "Warfare is the greatest affair of state."³⁸ The decision to go to war was a political decision to be taken by the political leadership and one that should not be taken lightly for, as Sun Tzu reminds his readers, "a vanquished state cannot be revived, the dead cannot be brought back to life."³⁹ Like Clausewitz, Sun Tzu emphasizes the interaction between war and politics. Indeed, he called generals "the supporting pillar of the state," and argued that "if the supporting pillar is marked by fissures, the state will invariably grow weak."⁴⁰ Sun Tzu also believes that political leaders should not micromanage the war effort. Indeed, he devotes a number of passages to potential errors that political leaders will inevitably make if they attempt to micromanage their soldiers.⁴¹ As a result, much as Clausewitz believed that it was acceptable for a general to disobey his political master, Sun Tzu argued that a general could sometimes disobey orders if following them could be disastrous for the military and, ultimately, the state.⁴² Sun Tzu also instructs generals to seize upon opportunities for battle in the absence of political authorization if victory seems certain.⁴³

Martin Van Creveld suggests that, "focusing on the fleet, Mahan had written almost as if policy did not exist."⁴⁴ This assessment is too extreme for Mahan believes that the use of navies

³² Clausewitz, 87.

³³ Clausewitz, 80-81.

³⁴ Clausewitz, 177 and Michael Howard, *Clausewitz: A Very Short Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 38.

³⁵ Clausewitz, 605.

³⁶ Clausewitz, 605.

³⁷ Clausewitz, 610.

³⁸ Sun Tzu, 167.

³⁹ Sun Tzu, 228.

⁴⁰ Sun Tzu, 178.

⁴¹ Sun Tzu, 178.

⁴² Sun Tzu, 214-15.

⁴³ Sun Tzu, 214-15.

⁴⁴ Van Creveld, 154.

should not only be fully subordinate to political ends, but also that navies were superior instruments for implementing policy than land forces.⁴⁵ Being more mobile and less symbolic of belligerent intentions, navies permit the influence of national policy to “be felt where national armies cannot go.”⁴⁶ In addition, because Mahan reasons that a navy should be used to secure the safety of maritime commerce, which was vital to national economies, he sees the navy as an instrument of both security policy and economic policy.⁴⁷

Finally, like the three aforementioned theorists, Corbett believes in the primacy of politics in war.⁴⁸ Michael Handel reasons that Corbett came to this belief before reading Clausewitz’s *On War* but also that the historian plausibly utilized *On War* to refine and clarify his own ideas on this topic.⁴⁹ Corbett argues that naval supremacy is not an end goal in itself; rather, naval supremacy must be pursued to meet political objectives. In accordance with this, Corbett stressed the utilitarian nature of the maritime dimension of war in supporting the primacy of politics. Therefore, unlike Mahan, who thinks that establishing absolute dominance of the sea is an end in itself, Corbett views efforts to gain a degree of limited and contested control of the sea, by which he means control of seaborne communications, as merely a means to serve a higher political end. Beyond this, Corbett acknowledges that the military is only one of several options for carrying out state policy and that, even if war is the option chosen, it may itself be “limited by contingent.”⁵⁰

Limited and Absolute War

Clausewitz theorizes that there were two types of war: limited and absolute war. He presents absolute war as a theoretical ideal to which real wars were imperfect approximations. Clausewitz reasons that absolute war is possible in theory because the intrinsic nature of war is “an act of force,” and there “is no logical limit to an act of force.”⁵¹ Moreover, because the object of war was to “compel our enemy to do our will,” Clausewitz reasoned that one is logically bound to use any and all force necessary to destroy the will of one’s enemy to resist.⁵² War in theory, therefore, tends to the extreme in which the only limit is the enemy’s strength of resistance. However, a range of factors prevent this from occurring in reality, including the political objectives of the belligerents. The higher the stakes in war and the more important the political stakes, the more war will tend to approximate absolute war.⁵³ Conversely, the more moderate or limited the political goals, the more a war will tend toward a more limited form of warfare. Thus, since political goals tend to be limited, the political nature of war serves as a modifying influence that makes limited wars both possible and also the more likely form of warfare.

⁴⁵ Philip Crowl, “Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Naval Historian,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 462.

⁴⁶ Crowl, 462 and Alfred Mahan, *Armaments and Arbitration, or the Place of Force in the International Relations of States* (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1912), 66-67.

⁴⁷ Crowl, 462 and Mahan, *Armaments and Arbitration*, 66-67.

⁴⁸ Michael Handel, “Corbett, Clausewitz, and Sun Tzu,” *Naval War College Review* 53 (2000): 107 and Van Creveld, 154.

⁴⁹ Handel, 107.

⁵⁰ Corbett, *Some Principles*, Chapter 5.

⁵¹ Clausewitz, 77.

⁵² Clausewitz, 75

⁵³ Clausewitz, 580, 593, 603, 610.

Sun Tzu does not present a similarly well-developed dialectic between absolute and limited war, nor does he rely solely on political objectives as a modifying influence on the extent of warfare. Rather, he presents moral maxims directly telling his readers to resist the temptation to trend toward what Clausewitz calls absolute war. For example, Sun Tzu argues, “In general, the method for employing the military is this: Preserving (the enemy’s) state capital is best, destroying their state capital second best. Preserving their battalions is best, destroying their battalions second best.”⁵⁴ Moreover, the scholar’s oft quoted maxim that “No country has ever profited from protracted warfare,” arguably provides a rationale to limit political objectives and, in turn, warfare.⁵⁵

Mahan’s emphasis on the necessity of achieving total command of the sea and the great efforts of men and materiel needed to achieve this, with the sea being treated as if it were a piece of territory capable of being conquered and ruled, demonstrates a tendency in his writings to see maritime war as tending toward the absolute.⁵⁶ Conversely, Corbett believes that maritime war tended toward a limited form. Corbett took from Clausewitz the concept of limited war and the conceptual framework for a nascent theory that did not emphasize all-out war in search of decisive battle. This provided Corbett with the stimulus to conceptualize maritime war as an inherently more limited form of warfare than continental warfare. He provides three arguments in support of this. First, continental war, in contrast to maritime war, tends to be fought between adjacent states. In Corbett’s opinion, this makes escalation almost inevitable.⁵⁷ Thus, in the same vein as Clausewitz own writings on absolute war, Corbett argues that “such territory is usually an organic part of your enemy’s country, or otherwise of so much importance to him that he will be willing to use unlimited effort to retain it.”⁵⁸

Second, Corbett argues that, in wars between contiguous continental states, “there will be no strategical obstacle to his (the enemy’s) being able to use his whole force.”⁵⁹ Therefore, the nature of continental war tends toward the absolute because one or both states are able to use all of the means at their disposal to protect their vital interests. Conversely, maritime warfare is not waged on contiguous territory but on the high seas or in remote, peripheral areas that do not threaten belligerents’ vital interests.⁶⁰ Thus, the sheer difficulty of waging war in these environments means that escalation is less probable. Beyond this, Corbett argues that, because the dominant naval power can isolate the theater of war to prevent the introduction of enemy reinforcements as well as secure its home defense, the conditions for the ideal limited war exist only in maritime warfare and can only be exploited by the preponderant naval power:

Limited war is only permanently possible to island Powers or between Powers which are separated by sea, and then only when the Power desiring limited war is able to command the sea to such a degree as to be able not only to isolate the distant object, but also to render impossible the invasion of his home territory.⁶¹

The Principle of Decisive Battle

⁵⁴ Sun Tzu, 177.

⁵⁵ Sun Tzu, 173.

⁵⁶ Van Creveld, 148 and Livezey, 52.

⁵⁷ Corbett, *Some Principles*, 54.

⁵⁸ Corbett, *Some Principles*, 54.

⁵⁹ Corbett, *Some Principles*, 54-5.

⁶⁰ Handel, 117.

⁶¹ Corbett, *Some Principles*, 57.

Clausewitz argues forcefully for engaging the enemy in decisive battle. Indeed, if the destruction of the enemy's main force is the strategist's main objective, Clausewitz believes that a single concentrated battle is the optimum means of achieving this.⁶² The destruction of the enemy forces in a decisive battle is not merely contributory to the final objective of the strategist; rather, it is an intrinsic part of that objective.⁶³ Moreover, Clausewitz believes that victory in decisive battle must be achieved at any cost in lives and materiel.⁶⁴ To emphasize this point, he described decisive battle as *die Schlacht*, slaughter.

Some of Sun Tzu's maxims suggest a preference for decisive battle. For example, he argues that "When employing them in battle, a victory that is long in coming will blunt their weapons and dampen their ardor," which may provide a rationale for ending wars quickly in a single major engagement.⁶⁵ However, other passages suggest that it is best to avoid battle entirely and to subdue one's enemies without combat. For example, Sun Tzu writes that "one who excels at employing the military subjugates other people's armies without engaging in battle, captures other people's fortified cities without attacking them, and destroys other people's states without prolonged fighting."⁶⁶ This passage reflects Sun Tzu's indirect, maneuver-based, and broader approach to war, in contrast to Clausewitz direct, attrition-based, and narrower approach to the subject.

Mahan shares Clausewitz's emphasis on decisive battle. The historian reasons that the primary mission of one's battle fleet is to engage and destroy the enemy's fleet in a decisive engagement: "the one particular result, which is the object of all naval action, is the destruction of the enemy's organized force, and the establishment of one's own control of the water."⁶⁷ Similarly, he argues that "the sound general principle that the enemy's fleet, if it probably can be reached, is the objective paramount to all others; because the control of the sea, by reducing the enemy's navy, is the determining consideration in a naval war."⁶⁸ Only after destroying the enemy's fleet could the full benefits of free-flowing friendly commerce, unimpeded raids against enemy commercial shipping, and blockades of the enemy's ports be achieved.

Corbett places comparatively little emphasis on the utility of decisive battle. Being fully conscious of the fact that large naval engagements rarely occur and, even when fought, rarely have a decisive influence on the course of a war in the same way that large land battles do, Corbett argues that focusing on decisive naval battle is wasteful.⁶⁹ Corbett actually goes so far as to claim that the much heralded British victory at Trafalgar had little impact on the Napoleonic Wars:

Trafalgar is ranked as one of the decisive battles of the world, and yet of all the great victories, there is not one which to all appearance was so barren of immediate result.... It gave England finally the dominion of the seas, but it left Napoleon dictator of the continent. So incomprehensible was its apparent sterility that to fill the void a legend grew up that it saved England from invasion.⁷⁰

⁶² Clausewitz, 143 and 596.

⁶³ Howard, 45.

⁶⁴ Clausewitz, 97.

⁶⁵ Sun Tzu, 173.

⁶⁶ Sun Tzu, 177.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Crowl, 458.

⁶⁸ Quoted in Crowl, 458.

⁶⁹ Corbett, *Some Principles*, 16.

⁷⁰ Julian S. Corbett, *The Campaign of Trafalgar* (London, UK: Longman, 1910), 408.

In contrast to Mahan's emphasis on decisive battles, Corbett focuses far more attention on blockading, the disruptive threat of a "fleet in being" near enemy shores, and naval support of land operations by transporting, supplying, and landing ground troops in joint operations.⁷¹ Corbett considers these activities to be the core of naval strength.

The Principle of Concentration

Clausewitz argues that concentration of superior forces is the best means to win a decisive battle. As he puts it, "The best strategy is always to be very strong; first in general, and then at the decisive point."⁷² If overall numerical superiority is not possible, then Clausewitz argues that one's forces should be employed with such skill that "a relative superiority is attained at the decisive point."⁷³ He believes that a talented commander should be able to determine the decisive point, the enemy's center of gravity or *schwerpunkt*, and concentrate his forces there for maximum effect.

Sun Tzu shares Clausewitz's emphasis on concentration. He similarly emphasizes the importance of determining where the enemy's weakest points are and concentrating one's forces at those key points so that "we are many and the enemy is few."⁷⁴ However, Sun Tzu arguably places greater emphasis on absolute numerical superiority than does Clausewitz for he provides instructions on how to utilize one's forces in scenarios where one's forces number five or even ten times greater than one's enemy.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, Sun Tzu's key points emphasize the necessity for cunning and deception to identify the weaknesses of one's enemy's and simultaneously hide one's own.⁷⁶

Mahan similarly argues that concentration was "the predominant principle" of naval warfare.⁷⁷ He reasons that "the maximum offensive power of the fleet... and not the offensive power of the single ship, is the true object of battleship construction."⁷⁸ Moreover, Mahan believes that it was only through concentrating in large battle-fleets that one's navy could engage and defeat the enemy's center of gravity, its fleets, in Trafalgar-like decisive battles. Beyond this, he argues in the same vein as the continental theorists on the point that the fleet must be most concentrated to strike at decisive points and that, as a general principle, the fleet must never be divided.⁷⁹

In contrast to Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, and Mahan, Corbett does not think that the maximum concentration of forces is the key to winning a decisive battle and defeating the enemy. He calls the principle of concentration "untrue" and "a kind of shibboleth," which is unworthy of its high standing amongst other authors.⁸⁰ In contrast, Corbett provides several arguments against the principle of concentration. First, superior concentration at sea permits enemy fleets to avoid one's own more easily and, therefore, reduces the probability of decisive battle.⁸¹ As a result,

⁷¹ Corbett, *Some Principles*.

⁷² Clausewitz, 204.

⁷³ Clausewitz, 196.

⁷⁴ Sun Tzu, 192.

⁷⁵ Sun Tzu, 177-178.

⁷⁶ Sun Tzu, 192-193.

⁷⁷ Crowl, 457.

⁷⁸ Alfred Mahan, *Lessons of the War with Spain, and Other Articles* (Boston, MA: Little-Brown, 1899): 38-39.

⁷⁹ Mahan, *The Influence of Seapower upon History*, 8-9 and 82-83 and Livezey, 51.

⁸⁰ Corbett, *Some Principles*, 160 and 134.

⁸¹ Corbett, *Some Principles*, 138.

less overt concentration is the way to entice a major engagement. Second, concentrating one's fleet reduces the ships available to protect sea lanes and ensure steady seaborne communication.⁸² As these are vital elements of maritime strategy, total concentration at sea is unworkable. Third, concentrated fleets are inflexible and comparatively easy to detect.⁸³ In this way, Corbett's theorizing is similar to Sun Tzu's emphasis on formlessness and deception. Indeed, both scholars reason that a fundamental principle of war is to manipulate one's enemy to fight on one's own terms. For Corbett, the flexibility to disperse and conceal the true strength and intentions of one's ships when necessary are essential to victory.⁸⁴

The Role of the People in War

Clausewitz saw war as a trinity made up of the policy of the government, the professionalism of the military, and the attitudes of the general population, which all play an equally significant part in warfare.⁸⁵ Following the French Revolution and the development of the *levee en mass*, war "became the business of the people," and "the people became a participant in war; instead of governments and armies as heretofore, the full weight of the nation was thrown into the balance."⁸⁶ Clausewitz left his discussion of civil-military relations underdeveloped, yet it is clear from his writings that he felt the people were an essential element in the trend toward absolute war. As he stated, with the addition to the people into the trinity of warfare, "War, untrammelled by any conventional restraints, had broken loose in its elemental fury."⁸⁷ Yet, simultaneously, he argued that the attitudes of the people had to be cultivated in order to reap the full benefits for military power.

Sun Tzu also recognizes the importance of popular support and participation in war. Indeed, he argues that "The Tao causes the people to be fully in accord with the ruler. (Thus) they will die with him; they will live with him and not fear danger."⁸⁸ Sun Tzu also seemingly recognizes that prolonged warfare would eventually dampen the martial spirit and support of the people, for he argues that, "When goods are expensive, the hundred surnames wealth will be exhausted. When their wealth is exhausted, they will be extremely hard-pressed (to supply) their village's military impositions."⁸⁹ Moreover, he argued that "the (mass) army values being victorious; it does not value prolonged warfare. Therefore, a general who understands warfare is Master of Fate for the people."⁹⁰

Mahan considers the number and character of the seagoing population in a state to be one of the six essential elements of sea power.⁹¹ He specifically emphasizes the endurance of the commercial and maritime-focused populace of England compared to the continental and agriculturally-focused French populace.⁹² Mahan also considered the United States to be grossly

⁸² Corbett, *Some Principles*, 132.

⁸³ Corbett, *Some Principles*, 131 and 138.

⁸⁴ Corbett, *Some Principles*, 134, 152, and 206

⁸⁵ Howard, 21.

⁸⁶ Clausewitz, 593.

⁸⁷ Clausewitz, 593.

⁸⁸ Sun Tzu, 167.

⁸⁹ Sun Tzu, 172.

⁹⁰ Sun Tzu, 172.

⁹¹ Mahan, *The Influence of Seapower upon History*, 39. Mahan's other essential elements of sea power include geographic position, physical conformation, extent of territory, national character, and the character of a government. Mahan, *The Influence of Seapower upon History*, 25-77.

⁹² Mahan, *The Influence of Seapower upon History*, 39-43.

deficient in this element of sea power in the late 19th century.⁹³ Similarly, although Corbett does not discuss the role of the masses in war to any great extent in *Some Principles*, he refers to the possibility that nationalist instincts could kindle “the people to a generous warmth,” and it is implicit throughout that he, like Mahan, considers a supportive and passionate population essential to imperial sea power.⁹⁴

Friction, Uncertainty, and the Means to Overcome these Problems

Clausewitz made friction and uncertainty central concepts in his theory of war; indeed, he considers both to be important intangibles of war, and uncertainty, along with violent emotion and rational policy, forms his paradoxical trinity.⁹⁵ In war, he argues, “Everything... is very simple, but the simplest thing is very difficult... Countless minor incidents – the kind you can never really foresee – combine to lower the general level of performance, so that one always falls short of the intended goal.”⁹⁶ Clausewitz believes that these problems could be overcome through courage, intuition, and iron willpower, which together constitute his concept of military genius.⁹⁷ As he puts it, “With uncertainty in one scale, courage and self-confidence must be thrown into the other to correct the balance.”⁹⁸ Regardless, Clausewitz rightly argues that the drive to overcome friction “pulverizes every obstacle” yet “wears down the machine as well.”⁹⁹

Friction and uncertainty are, arguably, comparatively unimportant in Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*. In contrast to Clausewitz, Sun Tzu argues that one can plan for virtually any eventuality in war through rational calculation. This can include the measurement of space, estimates of forces, calculations of numbers of men, comparisons of the relative strength of the opposing forces, and rationalizing the chances of victory.¹⁰⁰ Through this, Sun Tzu believes, a commander can determine the “conditions for victory” and be victorious. In another distinction from Clausewitz, Sun Tzu demonstrates confidence in the questionable possibility of error free victory and the notion that uncertainty can be overcome with good intelligence.¹⁰¹

Mahan also wrote of “uncertainties peculiar to the sea,” including the natural dynamics and vastness of the ocean.¹⁰² Though not discounting the importance of rational calculation, Mahan places a great deal of emphasis on a talented, courageous, and aggressive commander’s capacity to overcome these problems, including the ability to locate the enemy fleet, defeat them, and, consequently, gain command of the sea.¹⁰³ In this way, Mahan’s solution to the problems of friction and chance is broadly similar to that put forward by Clausewitz.

Finally, like Clausewitz, Corbett believes that attempting to generate theoretical laws of war was foolish because the “friction to which they are subject from the incalculable human

⁹³ Mahan, *The Influence of Seapower upon History*, 39-43.

⁹⁴ Corbett, *Some Principles*, particularly Part I, Chapter V, “Wars of Intervention – Limited Interference in Unlimited War.”

⁹⁵ Clausewitz, 89.

⁹⁶ Clausewitz, 119-121.

⁹⁷ Clausewitz, 100-104.

⁹⁸ Clausewitz, 85-86.

⁹⁹ Clausewitz, 138.

¹⁰⁰ Sun Tzu, 184.

¹⁰¹ Sun Tzu, 183-184 and 231-233.

¹⁰² Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1997), 51.

¹⁰³ Donald Chipman, “Mahan’s Classic View and The Profession of Arms,” *Air University Review* (March-April 1986): 3. Available at: <http://www.airpower.au.af.mil/airchronicles/aureview/1986/mar-apr/chipman.html>.

factors alone is such that the friction is stronger than the law.”¹⁰⁴ Moreover, Corbett believes that any fleet was subject to “peculiar conditions of friction which clog its freedom of disposition,” including friction derived from the demands of commerce protection.¹⁰⁵ The need for commerce protection conspires against the desire, in some instances, to concentrate the fleet into one powerful mass. However, whereas Clausewitz argues that genius, his solution to overcoming the problems of friction and uncertainty, “must be granted a certain power over and above successful calculations,” Corbett argues that careful calculation and rational strategic creativity were key.¹⁰⁶

The Offence and Defence in War

Clausewitz makes two main points about offence and defence in war. First, although the object of the defence was negative, he considers it a stronger form of war than the offence.¹⁰⁷ As a result of this, he reasons that a smaller defensive force could defeat a larger offensive force. Second, Clausewitz argues that the strength of the defence came from its dual elements: waiting for a blow to be struck, then counter-attacking. Defenders take up defensive positions in order to fight from them. A Clausewitzian defence is, therefore, a shield “made up of well-directed blows.”¹⁰⁸ The key to a defensive strategy is determining the right balance between waiting and counter-attacking. Indeed, Clausewitz reasons that, because the defender could rely on its own shorter supply lines and friendly population while the attacker’s supply problems and overall strength dwindled, there would come an optimal time in any defensive strategy, “the culminating point,” when the flashing sword of vengeance should be unleashed and the counter-attack begun.¹⁰⁹

Sun Tzu shares Clausewitz’s respect for the superior power of the defence. For example, he argues plainly that “One who cannot be victorious assumes a defensive posture; one who can be victorious attacks. In these circumstances by assuming a defensive posture, strength will be more than adequate, whereas in offensive action it would be inadequate.”¹¹⁰ Sun Tzu underscores this point with repeated warnings against attacking fortified cities, which he claims should be attempted “only when unavoidable.”¹¹¹

In contrast to Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, Mahan emphasizes the power of the offence in war. He argues that, “In naval war... the navy is the offensive,” and agrees with Farragut that “The best protection against the enemy’s fire is a well directed fire from our own guns.”¹¹² Mahan rightly reasons that, unlike soldiers on land, ships at sea cannot prepare ground or remain under cover when attempting to act defensively, which removes much of the advantage of the defence discussed by Clausewitz and Sun Tzu.¹¹³ Mahan also criticizes French attempts to use their fleet defensively, which he reasons “amount(ed) to abandoning any attempt to control the sea.”¹¹⁴ Similarly, William Livezey argues that Mahanian strategy rests on an assumption that

¹⁰⁴ Corbett, *Some Principles*, 6-7.

¹⁰⁵ Corbett, *Some Principles*, 160 and 134.

¹⁰⁶ Clausewitz, 190-192 and Handel, 112.

¹⁰⁷ Clausewitz, 84.

¹⁰⁸ Clausewitz, 357.

¹⁰⁹ Clausewitz, 357.

¹¹⁰ Sun Tzu, 183.

¹¹¹ Sun Tzu, 177.

¹¹² Alfred Mahan, *Admiral Farragut* (New York, NY: Appleton, 1892), 218.

¹¹³ Alfred Mahan, *Retrospect and Prospect: Studies in International Relations Naval and Political* (Boston, MA: Little-Brown, 1902): 151-69 and Alfred Mahan, *Naval Strategy Compared and Contrasted with the Principles and Practice of Military Operations on Land* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 150, 153, and 143, and Gray, 220.

¹¹⁴ Mahan, *Admiral Farragut*, 218.

“the best defense was offense, with the fight carried to a definite issue.”¹¹⁵ This assumption likely contributed to Mahan’s belief in the principle of concentration and in seeking decisive battle.¹¹⁶

Finally, consistent with his de-emphasis on seeking decisive battle, Corbett favours the strategic defensive, though with an emphasis on the offence at the level of operations.¹¹⁷ Not dissimilar to Clausewitz, Corbett suggests employing a broadly defensive strategy for the fleet, with some ships tasked with blockade duties and defence of sea lanes, but retaining the flexibility to attack and counter-attack enemy ships through intense local offensives, support amphibious operations, and undertake blockades and commerce raiding when necessary.¹¹⁸ Therefore, like Clausewitz, Corbett reasons that active-defence is the stronger form of warfare.

Conclusion

This brief overview of how Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, Mahan, and Corbett challenge and complement one another’s scholarship along nine major strategic themes offers two related insights. First, it suggests that these differing strands of strategic thought are not as competitive with one another as is generally assumed. Indeed, significant complementarity was observed throughout this analysis. Second, the notable areas where this diverse scholarship finds common ground suggest that contemporary scholars have much more to gain from an integrated approach to strategic thought than an approach limited by culture, geography, or time period. Overall, these findings suggest that the interplay between the master works of strategic thought is quite vibrant.

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¹¹⁵ Livezey, 51

¹¹⁶ Livezey, 51

¹¹⁷ Handel, 112.

¹¹⁸ Corbett, *Some Principles*, particularly Part II, Chapter III, “Theory of the Method.”

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