

Clausewitz as Counterpuncher: The Logic of Conventional Deterrence

If the romantic Prussian philosopher crossed paths with trainer Angelo Dundee, he would extol the virtues of counterpunching in boxing as well as in war. We can infer this from Carl von Clausewitz's discussion of offense, defense, and culmination of the two in *On War*. We can also test the strategic counterpunching hypothesis with a quick run through some of the major wars of the past two centuries. They generally demonstrate that it is best to take your opponent's best shot and then counter with what you have left. Ironically, this deterrent strategy, which gained such allure in the nuclear age, may be even more suitable to conventional war.

Clausewitz contends that defense is the stronger form of war, even though it serves a negative object. The reasons for this are manifold and span physical, moral, and psychological factors. In the physical realm, the attacker generally has longer lines of communications that are rendered insecure once they extend into enemy territory. The longer the lines of communication, the greater both their vulnerability and the consumption of energy necessary to deliver goods and services to the front lines or point of attack. Similarly, as the defender falls back from the frontiers, lines of communication are shortened and remain relatively secure in friendly territory. In land combat, knowledge of terrain is important, and the advantage goes again to the defender who has inhabited the territory and knows both the general lay of the land as well as details that may prove tactically and operationally advantageous. Swamps, rivers, hills, and mountains all favor the defender's cause, as does the bullet-stopping power of dirt.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century and the advent of the cylindrical bullet, which pushed the killing range out to nearly a thousand yards, being "dug-in" posed considerable advantage over attacking across the open ground in front of entrenched positions—so much so that the adage was a three-to-one manpower advantage was necessary to confer upon the attacker a reasonable chance of success. With the advent of breechloaders, repeating rifles, machine guns, and carefully registered artillery, the ratio increased. When one adds the logistical disadvantages

facing the attacker to the requirement for overwhelming concentration at the point of attack, the physical strength of the defense becomes apparent.

So too do the moral hazards for the attacker, as the proliferation of mass media make the politics of war a public, global phenomenon. Consider the German response to Louis Napoleon's declaration of war, cleverly stimulated by a German provocation in the Ems Dispatch. This piece of Bismarckian chicanery curiously made the offenders an aggrieved party. Nonetheless, Louis' indiscretion activated a defensive alliance of loosely confederated provinces and set in motion the war that made Germany into a modern state—all while the Austrians, recently defeated by the Prussians at Koeniggratz, stood in the window and watched. Fast-forward to the end of the twentieth century and another aggrieved offender emerged: Saddam Hussein. There is little doubt that Iraq's traditional 13th province Kuwait was stealing oil by diagonal drilling into Iraqi territory. Yet the Iraqi invasion stimulated both international outrage and a measured coalition response that eventually spelled the end of Hussein's regime. In both cases, the ostensible offenders, although seemingly justified in their attacks, suffered moral approbation, eventual defeat, and displacement.

Psychology also favors the defenders, who at the moment of attack become the aggrieved party. It is they who are defending their government, their homes, their women and children, and their way of life. These are powerful incentives to fight and fight ferociously. Fear of loss is typically a stronger psychological motivator than potential gain. When applied to the dynamic of offense and defense in warfare, although the attacker may have much to gain, the defender has more to lose and will fight ferociously to forestall the occasion.

Yet defense serves the negative object. Eventually, nations must take to the offensive to achieve their goals, especially if they seek to eliminate a threat. Such was the rationale for the Archidamian War of Sparta against Athens in the Peloponnesus two and half millennia ago and for the German invasion of Soviet Russia in 1941. Yet both of these wars proved disastrous for the aggressors. When, then, is the right time to attack? Clausewitz provides the answer in his discussion of culmination for the offense and defense. In fine Hegelian fashion, he uses opposites to make sense of these two relative terms. The offense culminates when it can no longer survive a counterattack, and the defense culminates when it can no longer conduct one. Which, then, is more likely to culminate first?

The previous discussion would point to the offense, which, like a spring, loses elasticity when fully extended, while a carefully marshalled defense continues to coil in its face. This assumes, of course, that the defense has the space and time to trade while the offense, like a hurricane ashore, naturally weakens. The ability of the defensive nation to attract allies is also important, since this can sometimes compensate for what is lost to the attack. Such was the case for France in 1914 and the Soviet Union in 1941. Both lost a great deal of their industrial base to the German attack but were shored up by allies until they had sufficiently recovered.

Hence evolves the logic of conventional deterrence. Since the offense is inherently weaker than the defense and loses strength as it proceeds into enemy territory, it is vulnerable to counterattack and generally loses the elasticity necessary to formulate its own counter-response. Also forfeited is the moral advantage that lies with the initial defender. There was little international compassion for the German and Japanese people at the end of World War II, even though both suffered grievously. The uncovering of concentration camps and the most heinous human-subject medical experiments served only to fuel notions of outrage and revenge.

These passions generally fuel the counterattack. Napoleon's adventure into the Iberian Peninsula met fierce local resistance that was aided by the British, and the campaign became a running sore for the republic-cum-empire. It was Portuguese trade with Britain in textiles that stimulated the Iberian campaign in the first place. Similarly, Russian trade with Perfidious Albion in pitch, tar, and lumber in the Baltic violated Napoleon's mercantile policies and provided impetus for his Russian campaign in 1812. Both met with eventual disaster and in combination bled away the advantage in manpower the French *levee en masse* had provided for earlier campaigns. These developments were certainly within the firm mental grasp of Clausewitz, but his backhanded recommendation for a deterrent strategy drew even more support in the wars that occurred in the century after his death.

Most theorists appear to be temporally cursed. Mahan's idea of a decisive battle for command of the sea got little play in the First World War, but many of his dicta were vindicated in World War II, providing one is willing to substitute aircraft carriers for battleships as capital vessels. Similarly, the resilience of populations under air attack in the Second World War made Giulio Douhet's propositions about command of the air ring hollow. Douhet, much like Mahan, was possibly vindicated by

the nuclear age that coincided with the Cold War. Both theorists had to wait about half a century to gain relevance. In the case of Clausewitz, the Pax Britannica of the nineteenth century provided scant opportunities to test his hypotheses in state-on-state conflict. The Crimean War turned on logistics and may have spelled the end of unarmored wooden sailing ships as the *sin qua non* of international power. The Italian, German, and American wars of unification that punctuated the decades immediately following the conflict in Crimea represent a mixed bag of military action with political overtones. While the first two featured decisive battles with immediate political results and appear rather limited in retrospect, the American Civil War was a slog, in which, according to Theodore Ropp, the power that commanded the sea defeated “a people who were too dependent on water transportation.”¹ In most of these nineteenth-century wars, Nathan Bedford Forrest appears to have been the preeminent philosopher. According to the Confederate general, the side that got there “fustest with the mostest” usually prevailed.²

The wars of the twentieth century demonstrated something different. The scale and scope of the two world wars gave full play to all variables in the Clausewitzian formula. Curiously, the industrialization of the participants did little to alter the relationship of people, militaries, and governments to passion, probability, and logic in determining outcomes. In most cases, nations found the industry they needed to prosecute what became industrial wars of attrition.

For World War I, the German attempt to invest Paris with a sweeping envelopment fell victim to dilatory execution and stiffened French resistance along the Marne River. This was aided by the French attack into Alsace-Lorraine being thwarted by German resistance and an immediate counterattack, throwing French troops back across their own lines of communication and providing the necessary reserves in manpower to attack the flanks of the German onslaught attempting to encircle Paris. Things devolved into a stalemate between rail power for the Germans and sea power for the Allies delivering goods and services to a virtually static front that stretched from Switzerland to the English Channel. The French had absorbed Germany’s best blows, attracted allies, and eventually counterattacked along the entire front. It was a war of exhaustion. Although the initial German attack stabilized along the Aisne River and stayed in possession of France’s industrial districts for almost four years, eventually the defense uncoiled and counterattacked. Debilitated by

four years of blockade, short on rations, and dogged by unrest on the home front, the German army collapsed. The strategic counterattack, not by design but happenstance, proved to be the winning formula in the key theater of the war. “Fustest with mostest” gave way to longest with the laatest for the victors.

World War II repeated the pattern. German attacks into Poland, Scandinavia, France and eventually the Soviet Union met with tremendous success. The Third Reich lacked only the oil of the Caucasus to comprise what Halford MacKINDER had called “the world island,”³ an economic unit knit together by railroads and impervious to the predation and strangulation afforded by sea power. Similarly, Japanese attacks in the Pacific took the Philippines, Indonesia, and Indochina while threatening Northern Australia and the Western United States as well as India. Yet again, the fruits of early aggression were spoiled by Allied counterattacks outside Moscow in 1941, at Guadalcanal and El Alamein in 1942, and Stalingrad and the Gilbert Islands in 1943. Although the cross-channel invasion of 1944 was pivotal to Allied success in recovering France and dismantling Germany, it was merely one in a number of campaigns that comprised a massive counteroffensive. Industrialization may have changed the character of war, but its true nature, with all the moral and psychological imperatives, appears to have remained the same. Surprise and freedom of action went to the offender, but the defender proved stronger in the end.

Strategically, the Axis offensives culminated with the attack on Pearl Harbor. The concomitant neutrality pact between the Soviet Union and Japan allowed the former to throw all of its newly acquired and recently moved industrial might at the German invaders. Japan was left to fend for itself alone in the Pacific against the greatest industrial power on the planet. Her plight became clear in late 1942 in the Solomon Islands, a tertiary sub-theater in what was admittedly the United States’ second priority, behind Germany, in the war. Guadalcanal was an encounter battle, and the United States could afford to feed the fray with men and machines at rates the Japanese simply could not match. The moral hazard of the sneak attack, compounded by hideous treatment of American prisoners in the Philippines, provided the psychological sauce for the industrial meat undergirding the US response. Similarly, German behavior in France, and the Soviet Union in the early years of the war in Europe, added fuel to the vengeful counterattack.

Ironically, nuclear weapons may have altered the equation. The Allies could afford to trade time and space in both world wars for the ability to marshal the reserves necessary for the counterattack. While the neutron-stopping power of dirt may indeed provide the wherewithal for a second-strike capability in a nuclear war, to what end? If cities are erased, industrial power eradicated, populations devastated, and perhaps the ecosphere of the entire planet severely damaged; what good is a counterattack? Yes, equal destruction can be visited upon the attacker—but, in that case, no one wins. Perhaps this is why nuclear war has not happened and perhaps why it may never happen. The war itself has become the enemy of its participants, and they realize it. Yet, under this umbrella of nuclear terror, war goes on. Korea, Kuwait, and Kosovo tend to demonstrate the power of the strategic counteroffensive in conventional wars.

Thus, conventional deterrence is rooted in the Clausewitzian logic of war, which comprises physical, moral, and psychological factors. All tend to favor defense followed by offense in an overall deterrent posture. When it comes to conventional warfare, deterrence makes logical and historical sense. Counterpunching works in war as well as boxing, for many of the same reasons. **SSQ**

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Editor's note: Steve Chiabotti is the longest serving and only remaining founding contributing editor for *Strategic Studies Quarterly*. Over the past 11 years, he has devoted his expertise and considerable talent to evaluating the content published in the journal. As he transitions to a well-deserved retirement, we wish him all the best and offer our most grateful thanks.

Notes

1. Theodore Ropp, *War in the Modern World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 184.
2. Ralph Keys, *The Quote Verifier: Who Said What, Where, and When* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), 72.
3. H. K. MacKinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1919), 90

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