

Clausewitz and Beaufre – the relationship of politics and war

Introduction

For obvious reasons, the following essay has to be limited in scope and depth. It will be mainly based on Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* and André Beaufre's three books *Introduction à la Stratégie*, *Dissuasion et Stratégie* and *La Stratégie de l'Action*. The other books noted in the bibliography, however, represent all sources consulted.

Bearing Beaufre's concept of total strategy in mind, I will analyse Clausewitz's thoughts on the relationship between politics, war and their interaction. In doing so, I will omit Clausewitz's theoretical concept of ideal war and limit this analysis on war's articulation in reality. As so often, *On War* proves to be fecund but rather opaque. With hindsight and preconceived ideas, however, one might find for anything concerning war an adequate quote in Clausewitz's rich, but mostly unedited, text. Nevertheless, I will show that every aspect of Beaufre's thinking can be found in *On War*. In summarising Beaufre's concept of total strategy, I will argue that Beaufre, with his background of the French strategic thought, assimilated and synthesised Clausewitz's and Basil Liddell Hart's key concepts. I will argue that Beaufre freed strategy of its military shackles, and broadened its sense in formulating a methodology that provides decision-makers with rationale-based alternative short-term courses of action keeping long-term political aims in sight.

Clausewitz and the interaction of politics and strategy

Clausewitz defines war as an act of force to compel the enemy to do our will.¹ In dividing the art of war into tactics and strategy, he states that 'in tactics the means are the fighting forces...; the end is victory.'² Furthermore, 'the original means of strategy is victory – that is, tactical success; its ends, in the final analysis, are those objects which will lead directly to peace.'³ For Clausewitz, therefore, tactical success of the fighting forces of some sort will ultimately lead to peace. Clausewitz notes that the application of these tactical successes for

¹ Clausewitz (1989), p. 75

² *ibid.*, p. 142

³ *ibid.*, p. 143

the attainment of the objectives that lead to peace will be attended and influenced by factors such as the country and the people of the theatre of war, the time and season of the operation, and the nature of the terrain.⁴ Their influence on operations varies in kind and degree according to the circumstances. Clausewitz distinguishes between the objectives which tactical attainment might cause victory directly, and others which do not. For the latter, he mentions the capture of a position as a example of a successful engagement in terms of terrain.⁵ The first group of objectives includes the destruction of the armed forces, the occupation of the country, and the breaking of the enemy's will.⁶ According to Clausewitz, this would be in theory the natural sequence in war. Once the enemy's forces have been destroyed, the enemy's territory can be occupied and his will to resist will eventually crumble.⁷ In reality, however, the destruction of the enemy may be unrealistic because the inequality of strength in material and moral forces might make victory improbable or only achievable at an unacceptable cost.⁸ Clausewitz points out two general ways in which the likelihood of success can be brought about without defeating the enemy's fighting forces.

First, one can take action in order to disrupt the opposing alliance, or to paralyse it, or one can affect the political scene in order to gain new allies.⁹ Clausewitz appreciates the possible effect of such operations on the enemy's will to resist when he states that 'if such operations are possible it is obvious that they can greatly improve our prospects and that they can form a much shorter route to the goal than the destruction of the opposing armies.'¹⁰ Additionally, Clausewitz acknowledges the use of a credible deterrence in order to compel the enemy to do our will. He says that 'if...the enemy is to be reduced to submission by an act of war, he must either be positively disarmed or placed in such a position that he is threatened with it.'¹¹ Even a mere display of force may decide matters without bloodshed if it persuades the

⁴ Clausewitz (1989), p. 143

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 143

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 90; Here is the differentiation between objectives of tactical, operational and strategic significance of help: Military action is always done on the tactical level. It is the art of combining all means at one's disposal in the area of engagement in the best suited way which is coherent with the overall strategic aim in order to achieve the assigned objective. However, the ensuing effects are called tactical, operational, or even strategic depending on the resulting support or attainment of the strategic aim. Even so, one can only identify the significance of a certain objective in the aftermath. However, actions are always taken in an unique dialectical context which interrelated factors no plan can fully take into consideration. Therefore, the resulting effect of an action is always the product of its context and to some degree of the contingency of events. This is the reason why (military) planning is an area of probability and chance.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 92

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 91

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 92; p. 387, 484: Clausewitz recognises the importance foreign and domestic political conditions may have on the conduct of war.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 92-93; Beaufre (1985), p. 99: Beaufre calls this approach "exterior manoeuvre" which is an element of the concept of indirect strategy.

enemy that resistance or his offensive intentions are pointless: '...where the decision has been bloodless, it was determined in the last analysis by engagements that did not take place but had merely been offered.'¹²

Second, one can take action in order to increase the enemy's expenditure of effort.¹³ For this end, Clausewitz notes three methods: The first method being the seizure of enemy territory in order to exact financial contributions, or even to devastate it.¹⁴ The second method being giving priority to operations that will do the enemy most harm. In doing so, Clausewitz discerns two possible directions in which the armed forces may be employed. One direction points to the whereabouts of the enemy's main forces in order to seek a decisive battle, the other direction leads towards supply depots, fortresses, towns and finally to the capital, the heart of the enemy's political power.¹⁵ Clausewitz clarifies that 'the first is primarily military, the other more political. But if we take our view from the highest point, both are equally military, and neither the one nor the other can be eligible unless it suits the circumstances of the case.'¹⁶

Finally, the last method is the gradual exhaustion of the enemy's material and moral forces by protracted war.¹⁷

In any case, however, it is the war's political aims and their value that 'determine the sacrifices to be made for it in magnitude and also in duration.'¹⁸

One may recapitulate that a particular tactical success evokes a certain effect on a campaign, and therefore on the conduct of the war. Given the various circumstances in which operations are conducted, these effects may differ depending on the specific factors that interplay with engagements. Furthermore, 'any greater unity formed in a combination of engagements by being directed toward a common aim', so Clausewitz, 'can also be considered as a means.'¹⁹ This implies what is nowadays understood as operational thinking: The possibility to conceive a military campaign in which military actions are concerted, for example in a series of engagements or a combined set of campaigns, according to an effect-based and coherently orchestrated plan, which produces a desired operational, or even

¹¹ Clausewitz (1997), p. 8

¹² Clausewitz (1989), p. 386: Clausewitz argues that this effect caused by planning alone has consequently to be supported by other means than the force of arms.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 93

¹⁴ Clausewitz (1989), p. 93; Clausewitz (1997), p. 29

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 529

¹⁶ Clausewitz (1997), p. 30

¹⁷ Clausewitz (1989), p. 93

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 92

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 143

strategic effect; peace that is.²⁰ Clausewitz is fully aware of the repercussion that operational outcomes will have on the originally formulated political aims which might, consequently, alter considerably during the course of war.²¹

Clausewitz dissects the art of war into tactics and strategy. Tactics is concerned with the form of the individual engagement and strategy with its use.²² However, the engagement's use can only be established if its purpose to further the object of war can somehow be determined. This is exactly the difficulty the commander faces.²³ Clausewitz repeatedly stresses the importance of war being seen as an instrument of policy, and not as something autonomous. Nevertheless, he underlines several times that policy must be consistent with its means.²⁴ According to Clausewitz, violence just happens to be an additional, specific means in times of war.²⁵ However, Clausewitz never states that in war the other, say non-violent, means of political intercourse cease to act.²⁶ Clausewitz just argues that the degree of employed violence depends on the stakes involved. Are these stakes high, so will be the effort and the will to sustain the war as well as the readiness to escalate the means of violence.²⁷ If a government wants to overcome an enemy, it must match its effort against the enemy's power of resistance, which is the product of the total means (F) at his disposal and the strength of his will (ψ).²⁸ Keeping in mind that war in reality stretches over a certain time-span and is unique in its evolving circumstances, one recognises how thoroughly Beaufre has assimilated Clausewitz's theoretical thinking. Beaufre reduces strategy (S) to one formula: $S = K F \psi t$.²⁹ Strategy is, according to Beaufre, the product of the factors K (specific factor applicable to the case concerned), F (material force), ψ (psychological factor),

²⁰ Clausewitz (1989), p. 143

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 92

²² *ibid.*, p. 128: Tactics involves the planning and executing of engagements. Strategy coordinates each of them with the others in order to further the object of the war; p. 132

²³ *ibid.*, p. 140

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 87

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 87: War is a pulsation of violence, variable in strength and therefore in the speed with which it explodes...;...it always lasts long enough for influence to be exerted on the goal and for its own course to be changed in one way or another—long enough...to remain subject to the action of a superior intelligence. [The political aim] must adapt itself to its chosen means...; yet the political aim remains the first consideration. Policy...will permeate all military operations...it will have a continuous influence on them; p. 605

²⁶ Clausewitz (1989), pp. 87-88: The more powerful and inspiring motives for war,..., the closer will war approach its abstract concept, the more important will be the destruction of the enemy, the more closely will the military aims and the political objects of war coincide, and the more military and less political will war appear to be. On the other hand, the less intense the motives, the less will the military element's natural tendency to violence coincide with political directives. As a result,...the conflict will seem increasingly *political* in character.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 77, pp. 87-88

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 77

²⁹ Beaufre (1985), p. 117

and t (time factor). Beaufre defines strategy as the art of the dialectic of two opposing wills using force to resolve their dispute.³⁰

Clausewitz is awkwardly vague about how exactly political aims are translated into a coherent strategy in practice. Even though Clausewitz repeatedly negates the possibility to create an all-embracing, everlasting doctrine that may be applicable to every kind of war or campaign, he acknowledges that theory can be of use for the evaluation of engagements' purposes: Theory might help to indicate the utility of a certain action in examining all ends and means for every campaign in a particular war 'in accordance with their effects and their relationship to one another.'³¹ He discards, however, the possibility of a rule based model for the art of war because every campaign takes place in a unique set of circumstances. Clausewitz emphasises, therefore, the importance of the commander's intellect and educated, trained, experienced, and sound judgement not only in executing plans but in forging them as well.³²

How does the military commander translate political aims of war into military objectives? How are engagements affected by the strategic aim they are supposed to attain? How are the political aims affected by military results? Clausewitz's answers are not quite satisfactory because he simply indicates that an interaction between politics, strategy and tactics exists but he does not disclose how a decision-maker, in practice, can take these, in a rational manner, into consideration. Beaufre goes in this respect a step further. He distils Clausewitz thinking and makes it more concrete. Furthermore, Beaufre creates a basis for a theory that should enable the strategist to provide the decision-maker with viable, effect-based alternative courses of action which are still in coherence with the overall political aim.

Beaufre and the concept of total strategy

In the books *Introduction à la Stratégie* and *Dissuasion et Stratégie* the concept of total strategy has to be seen on the background of nuclear deterrence and the constraint this had in pursuing political aims with violent means. At first, however, Beaufre's understanding of total strategy is limited to its traditional sense. Beaufre just emphasises that in the context of the Cold War, in armed conflicts other means than military force become more important in

³⁰ Beaufre (1985), 16

³¹ Clausewitz (1989), pp. 140-143

³² *ibid.*, p. 128: The conduct of war consists in the planning and conduct of fighting; pp.140-141; p. 578: Theory cannot equip the mind with formulas for solving problems, nor can it mark the narrow path on which the sole

order to compel the opponent to do one's will. The direct military confrontation of two nuclear powers being potentially devastating, Beaufre perceives the necessity to create a tool which allows to take decisions in daily affairs more systematically and rationally because they are based on a prospective model.³³ For that end, he proposes to adapt the military decision-making process, which he calls strategic methodology, and to apply it in the sphere of politics. Beaufre only clarifies in *Stratégie de l'action*, that strategy and its methodology go beyond war and cover the whole spectrum of interest-conflict and conflict-resolution. Strategy as a method of thinking is neutral in the sense that it is applicable towards allies, non-allies, and enemies in situations of cooperation as well as confrontation.³⁴ Beaufre's definition of total strategy mutates, therefore, from "the art of the dialectic of two opposing wills using force to resolve their dispute" to "choice of means likely to achieve the ends laid down by policy".³⁵ Strategy, thus, becomes a permanent process of assessment of situations, possible courses of action, possible effects on material and psychological forces, not only during war but in peace as well. Policy and strategy, therefore, are interacting without end in a feedback loop. Policy sets the overall aim and effort; strategy evaluates and re-evaluates possible courses of action and their resulting mutual effects, plans, and sets coherently aims for all involved means of power (military, economy, diplomacy). Generally speaking, Beaufre argues that political aims can be attained through two modes of strategic behaviour: the first being direct and the second being indirect.³⁶ Both modes are total in the sense that they affect every means of state-power and are not exclusive but interplay. Their employment depends on the specific circumstance of a given interest-conflict. It is the result of the comparative analysis and evaluation of the antagonists' means of power (means of persuasion and dissuasion such as military, economical, ideological might), conflicting domestic and foreign interests, degree of domestic and foreign constraints or freedom of action, attached value to aims, and all possible courses of action, everything interacting, when the antagonists try to attain their long-term aims. The employment of military power will be the dominant means in the direct mode, a secondary means, though, in the indirect mode of total strategy.

solution is supposed to lie by planting a hedge of principles on either side. But it can give the mind insight into the great mass of phenomena and of their relationships, then leave it free to rise into the higher realms of action.

³³ Beaufre (1985), p. 11-12; Beaufre (1964); pp. 194-195

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 11; Beaufre (1997), p. 47

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 16; Beaufre (1964), p. 181; Beaufre (1997), p. 50

³⁶ Beaufre (1997), p. 50, pp. 121-144

Conclusion

Beaufre's strategic thought represents the synthesis of Western thought on the art of war since the French revolutionary wars. In it, all key concepts of thinkers such as Antoine Henri Jomini, Clausewitz, Foch, Liddell Hart, and Raymond Aron converge to one concise model. Clausewitz recognises that war cannot be seen as an isolated act. He struggles, however, throughout his writing, aiming to write a book on war and its nature, with the fact that war is intertwined with every aspect of human affairs. However, he describes and names key aspects of war's nature giving him a lasting imprint on the community of strategic thinkers. His early death, though, prevented him from giving the finishing touch to his *magnus opus*. Jomini's *Précis de l'Art de la Guerre* and the writings of all those mentioned above continued this process of discerning and defining key concepts; all of which have now become current in the Western strategic terminology. It can be said that even though Clausewitz is fully aware of the possibilities and consequences of what Beaufre calls total strategy, he oscillates between what he calls military action and political action without explicitly integrating them in one concept what Beaufre does.

Beaufre's formulation of the concept of total strategy has not only broadened the sense of strategy, nor has it only opened the application of strategic thinking to any form of conflict resolution, but it has been a first step in the formulation of a methodology that provides the strategist with a tool to evaluate different scenarios allowing them to come up with different alternative short-term courses of action which will be coherent with long-term political aims. This enables decision-makers, without losing desired long-term aims out of sight, to react to developments rationally, and with the necessary flexibility.

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