

## *The Strategic Theory of Clausewitz*

The strategic theory of Carl von Clausewitz has long been a primary source of ideas for military strategists. But does it offer insights for strategists of nonviolent defense?

This chapter discusses strategic *theory*; strategy is dealt with in chapter 2. The distinction between strategic theory and strategy is important because there is considerable confusion in the literature between the two. The failure to clearly distinguish them and to understand their relationship partly accounts for the shortcomings in existing defense strategies.

A theory is a systematic statement of the principles that explain a set of facts or phenomena. According to Peter Paret, a theory cannot address every variable of its subject, but it should have the capacity to incorporate new findings without its basic hypotheses being proved inadequate or false.<sup>1</sup> In the view of Clausewitz, theory must be comprehensive: It must be able to accommodate all aspects of its subject over all periods of time. The function of theory is to put all factors in systematic order and to trace each action to an adequate, compelling cause. It should explain all relevant phenomena, show how one is related to another, and highlight those that are important. If new principles emerge, theory should identify them.<sup>2</sup> Theory must be realistic and flexible and have the potential for further development.<sup>3</sup> Strategic theory, according to Clausewitz, deals specifically with the components of war and their interrelationships.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the importance of theory, Clausewitz warns, it cannot provide a formula for solving problems nor a set of principles that

reveal where “the sole solution is supposed to lie.” What it can do, he claims, is provide insight into the relevant phenomena and their relationships. Ultimately, however, theory is only a guide for “the higher realms of action.”<sup>5</sup>

Strategic theory is not a well-defined field, but within the context of this study it is considered to have three functions. First, it is a framework for explaining the nature and causes of conflict in the international system and for identifying the causes of conflict in a particular situation. Second, it is a framework for identifying the appropriate strategic aims for dealing with a particular conflict and for guiding the formulation of a strategy to achieve those aims. And third, within the context of this strategy it is a framework for providing tactical guidance. Strategic theories have usually concerned themselves with elements of the second and third functions, although it is historically uncertain how often political or military leaders have used strategic theory to guide the formulation of their strategies. In any case, this chapter will evaluate the suitability of Clausewitzian strategic theory in performing all three functions.

Although other classical strategic thinkers—including Sun Tzu, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Antoine-Henri Jomini—are important, the Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz devoted most attention to the question of strategic theory and left the most pronounced legacy in this respect. Like Sun Tzu, Jomini, and other theorists, Clausewitz had much to say on strategy. It is his thoughts on strategic theory, however, that are most important in the context of this study.

Classical strategic theory was first systematically expounded by Clausewitz in his famous book *On War*, published posthumously in 1832. Although the collection of papers, published as a book, represented twelve years of intensive thought, it had not been completed at the time of his death. In a note with the manuscript, Clausewitz wrote: “what I have written so far would . . . only deserve to be called a shapeless mass of ideas . . . liable to endless misinterpretation.”<sup>6</sup>

It should be noted at the outset that there is an ongoing debate regarding the value of the Clausewitzian legacy. At one level, this debate includes much discussion regarding the coherence of the argument in *On War*. Although Paret believes that Clausewitz offers “an essentially consistent theory of conflict”;<sup>7</sup> Basil Liddell Hart describes his work as too abstract and error-ridden;<sup>8</sup> Raymond Aron maintains it is ambiguous;<sup>9</sup> Azar Gat regards it as unclear and

“endemically conflicting”;<sup>10</sup> and Michael Howard describes it as “presented with infuriating incoherence.”<sup>11</sup> Whatever the case, it is clear that his argument is not straightforward. Some of this stems from the incompleteness of the manuscript itself. In fact, Gat argues, the first book of *On War* reflects the latest stage in Clausewitz’s thinking, the middle section reflects the earliest stage, and the last section reflects the intermediate stage; and these sections incorporate “fundamentally contrasting ideas.” Gat believes that, given the unfinished state of the manuscript, it is inappropriate to interpret the work as a “coherent whole.”<sup>12</sup> Gallie ascribes the complexity of the text not only to its incompleteness but also to Clausewitz’s supposed use of a Kantian methodology;<sup>13</sup> Gat points out Clausewitz’s supposed use of Hegelian dialectics to resolve the tension between his theoretical conception of absolute war and the reality of historical experience;<sup>14</sup> and Howard simply blames “the tortuous and self-contradictory quality” of much of his writing.<sup>15</sup>

At a more fundamental level, the debate includes a discussion regarding the historical importance and contemporary relevance of Clausewitz’s theory itself. While Paret argues that there is “little evidence that soldiers and governments have made use of his theories,”<sup>16</sup> Roger Leonard cites evidence that his work became “a dominating force in the theory and conduct of war” in Europe and elsewhere,<sup>17</sup> and Liddell Hart asserts that the teachings of Clausewitz—taken without understanding and complicated by his errors—have had a great impact on the course of history and “gone far to wreck civilization.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, as Howard argues, his influence has been variable: Some central ideas have been largely ignored; some have been distorted yet widely accepted; still others have been adopted into national military doctrines.<sup>19</sup> Whatever its historical importance, Clausewitzian thought is the appropriate place to start an examination of classical strategic theory and to reconsider its relevance to contemporary strategy.

Clausewitz belongs to the mainstream of the realist tradition in international relations. His doctrine is based on the conservative assumptions characteristic of that school of thought. For example, he accepts the statist conception of international politics and considers war to be the business of states and their governments. In addition, he believes war to be a proper instrument for settling conflicts between states and considers law and morality to be of minor significance in the conduct of foreign policy.<sup>20</sup>

The conceptual framework used by Clausewitz is based on his belief in the "dual nature" of war.<sup>21</sup> Thus, while the first few pages of his book discuss the theory of "absolute war" (in terms of which he sometimes described the Napoleonic wars),<sup>22</sup> most of the book is devoted to a description of "limited war." This is highlighted, for example, by his discussion of the resources to be mobilized for war. This can only be determined, Clausewitz argued, following several considerations: an examination of the enemy's political object in relation to one's own; efforts to gauge the strength, character, and abilities of the enemy government and its people in relation to one's own; and an evaluation of the political sympathies of third states.<sup>23</sup> Within this "dual-nature" framework, the notion of absolute war, Clausewitz believed, explained the inner logic of war.<sup>24</sup>

The main elements of *strategic theory* described by Clausewitz are the relationship between politics and war,<sup>25</sup> the principle of polarity and the element of "friction," the principle of the superiority of the defense over the offense, and the concept of the center of gravity. In terms of methodology, Clausewitz often posits the absolute and then describes modifications made necessary by the lessons of historical experience.

There is a strong normative element in Clausewitzian theory. This is reflected in the central tenet—which he emphasizes repeatedly—that the limits of war should be set by policy: "*war is only a branch of political activity; . . . it is in no sense autonomous.*" According to Clausewitz, war does not mean the suspension of political intercourse or change the nature of it: "war is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means." Partly because of its complete subjection to politics, war rarely assumes its absolute form; it remains a halfhearted affair. Though there might be no logical limit to the application of force, there certainly is a political one. Despite the frequent misrepresentation of Clausewitz on this crucial point, in his view "war cannot be divorced from political life" and "policy will determine its character."<sup>26</sup>

According to Clausewitz, policy should represent all interests in the community.<sup>27</sup> The aim of policy is to reconcile all aspects of administration with spiritual values "and whatever else the moral philosopher may care to add."<sup>28</sup> Because strategy cannot be divorced from policy, costs and benefits must be assessed.

The relationship between politics and war is highlighted by the important difference between the political object and the military aim. The *political object*—or "original motive"—of war is "to

impose our will on the enemy"<sup>29</sup> in order, as Hugh Smith explains it, to establish a new political relationship between the parties.<sup>30</sup> The reason for wanting to do this varies from one war to the next, but, Clausewitz asserts, the *ultimate objective* is "to bring about peace." The *military aim* of war, however, is always the same: "to disarm the enemy."<sup>31</sup>

At the resort to war, the political object is displaced by the military aim,<sup>32</sup> and it is through this displacement of the object by the aim that each war becomes an indivisible whole in which the different engagements are organized in relation to the single strategic aim. Furthermore, this displacement makes a unified theory of war possible, Boserup and Mack explain, because all wars have the same aim.<sup>33</sup> Also, this displacement of the object by the aim determines the principal characteristic of "absolute" war. War becomes a struggle of polar opposites that tends to escalate to the extreme: "the victory of one side excludes the victory of the other."<sup>34</sup> In the language of game theory, it is zero-sum.

It is evident, however, from a study of military history, "that *immobility and inactivity* are the normal *state* of armies in war, and *action is the exception*." The paradox that war is often slow and inconclusive, when in theory it ought to "run its course steadily like a wound-up clock," is explained by several principles at work to which polarity is not applicable: the influence of the political object on the military aim, the retarding influence of fear and indecision, the imperfection of human perception and judgment, the elements of "friction" in war, and, importantly, the superiority of the defense over the attack.<sup>35</sup>

The superiority of the defense derives from the fact that where an attack is not immediately successful, it soon starts to "wear down." In contrast, because the war is being fought on the defender's own territory, it is easier for the defense to maintain, among other things, its communication and supply lines. In addition, mobilization of people and resources is assisted by popular hostility toward the aggressor among the domestic constituency, in previously neutral states, and among allies.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, the superiority of the defense derives from the fact that it has the greater say in determining the *nature* and *course* of the war. After the initial offensive strike—which, for effectiveness, would have to be directed against the opponent's "center of gravity"—the defense has the initiative in time. It decides when, where, and how to strike back and in doing so determines how the conflict

is conducted; it can choose a strategy to unbalance the opponent and use time to exhaust it.<sup>37</sup> Importantly, then, while this principle does *not* mean that the defense will always prevail in war, it suggests that the superiority of the defense derives largely from the power to choose the *type* of defense.

The final major element of strategic theory explained by Clausewitz is the principle of the center of gravity. The first task in strategic planning, he argues, is to identify the enemy's centers of gravity (sources of power) and, if possible, to trace them back to a single element. By analyzing the dominant characteristics of both belligerents, Clausewitz suggests, it is possible to detect the center of gravity—"the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends"—which can be weak or strong. Against this point, the center of the enemy's power, all energy should be concentrated and directed. In a very few cases (for example, in circumstances in which multiple opponents act independently of each other) it might not be realistic to reduce several centers of gravity to one. Where this is the case, there is no alternative but to act as if there were two or more wars, with each opponent having its own center of gravity.<sup>38</sup> In some circumstances, the center of gravity may change. For example, the entry of a new ally into the war might shift the center of gravity; this is essentially what happened when the United States entered the two world wars.

Just as it is necessary to identify and attack the opponent's center of gravity, it is also necessary for the defense to concentrate resources in support of its own. How is this center of gravity chosen? Strictly speaking, it is not. What is chosen is a type of defense. As a result, "this imposes a center of gravity *objectively* on both belligerents." If the center of gravity is destroyed, the entire defense will collapse.<sup>39</sup>

How then are the type of defense and the corresponding center of gravity related to the political object of the attacker? In warfare the political object is displaced by the military aim, so the entire activity of the attacker should be directed toward the aim (destroying the center of gravity) and not toward the object. This is so because what is strategically important is *not* the political object but *destruction of the capacity to deny its achievement*. What really matters, then, is that a type of defense should be chosen that allows ready defense of the defender's center of gravity;<sup>40</sup> in this case, strategic withdrawal, counteroffensive, and reconquest are always possible.<sup>41</sup>

While the offense decides what the object of war shall be, the defense “chooses” its center of gravity. It may be such things as their armed forces, the importance of which Clausewitz emphasized, or it may be a capital city, the armed forces of a stronger ally, the community of interest among allies, the personalities of leaders and public opinion,<sup>42</sup> or the economic capacity to sustain the war.<sup>43</sup> Whatever it is, however, the choice of a type of defense determines the center of gravity. This highlights the superiority of the defense over the offense, mentioned earlier: The defense, by “choosing” its center of gravity, also chooses where, what, and how (that is, with what weapons) it should be attacked. “Properly used this is an immense and often decisive advantage.”<sup>44</sup>

As noted above there are (at least) two distinct centers of gravity in warfare. One is determined by the defense and should be the point attacked in the first place. If the defense is able to withstand the force of the attack—which will gradually diminish—until its “culminating point” is reached, then a counterattack against the center of gravity of the attacker’s defense becomes possible.<sup>45</sup>

The center of gravity must be correctly identified by the opponent in order for there to be a direct attack upon it, and it will determine which weapons can be used and which ones are useless. This is because the means (whether a rifle, a nuclear weapon, an act of sabotage, or a nonviolent action) are useful only insofar as they relate to the center of gravity.<sup>46</sup> For example, in the Vietnam War, the form of warfare was determined by the guerrilla strategy of what was, strategically speaking, the (North Vietnamese) defense. As John Collins has noted, because the United States failed to identify the North Vietnamese center of gravity, it was difficult to define a decisive military aim and to formulate a relevant strategic plan.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, it led to the use of certain weapons, such as strategic bombing, that were, strategically speaking, quite useless.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, during the Gulf War, the center of gravity of the Iraqi defense was clearly its army, a center of gravity with which the United States–led multinational forces were well equipped to deal.

The central point of the argument at this stage can now be identified. It is common in traditional defense thinking—but not deterrence theory—to imagine a range of credible attack scenarios and to design defense countermeasures to meet each one of them; that is, to mold the defense in response to the type of attack. This is a fundamental error arising from a failure to understand the precise strategic meaning of defense—usually by confusing it with

some vague political notion like "protection." Defense does not consist of protecting whatever happens to be attacked, although in practice this is what often happens. Any chess player, as Boserup and Mack explain it, knows how ineffective such a piece-by-piece strategy would be. In defense strategy, something is worth defending only to the extent that it serves to defend one's own center of gravity or to attack that of the opponent. Its value can be determined only after a strategy has been formulated, and not before.<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, the choice of a defense strategy is not a straightforward one. According to Clausewitz, it is governed by the spirit and limiting conditions of the age (which determine the means available), by the particular characteristics of states, and by the nature of war itself. Moreover, while the political object remains the first consideration, it must still be adapted to the chosen means, "a process which can radically change it." Military strategists are entitled to require that the trend and designs of policy are not inconsistent with the means chosen. Even so, "means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose."<sup>50</sup> This is a view shared by Liddell Hart: While policy should be adapted to the conditions of war, strategy is subservient to policy.<sup>51</sup>

Although he did not make the distinction explicit, it is evident that Clausewitz recognized the existence of two related constraints on the choice of a defense strategy. The first (and more fundamental) is the constraint imposed on strategy by society itself; the second is the constraint imposed on strategy by policy. Howard has noted this distinction as well: War as an instrument of policy, and policy itself, are "the product of certain basic social factors."<sup>52</sup> This is important because it means that even a defense strategy that is vastly superior in the strategic sense must be both politically acceptable and consistent with policy before it can be implemented. The first constraint can be illustrated by reference to the Vietnam War. The use of nuclear weapons by the U.S. forces was virtually inconceivable because their use would have violated "the limits set by political, social and cultural factors."<sup>53</sup> The second constraint can be illustrated by reference to the Gulf War. Although the United States-led coalition had the capability to annihilate the Iraqi army, it did not do so, because U.S. policy did not include the destruction and dismemberment of the Iraqi state.<sup>54</sup> Clearly, there are societal and policy limits on strategy.

The strategic theory elaborated by Clausewitz has been criticized for its failure to address such issues as naval warfare; the role



of administrative, institutional, and technological factors; and the significance of economics. But it is evident that many such variables, to which Clausewitz at least alluded, can be fit into his theoretical scheme. It is possible, Paret asserts, "to develop and analyze a concept without illustrating it exhaustively."<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, it is apparent that Clausewitzian theory is concerned exclusively with military strategy; it is not a theory for dealing with political conflict generally. Nor is it concerned with minimizing the costs of such a strategy. Kindhearted people, Clausewitz asserts, might think that there is some way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed and that this is the true aim of war. "Pleasant as it sounds, it is a fallacy that must be exposed."<sup>56</sup>

Despite Clausewitz's preoccupation with war, many of his admirers credit him with wider political interests. In Gallie's view, however, this is misleading. While Clausewitz regarded war as an extension of policy, his remarks on politics are abstract and meager. Unlike other theorists of war, such as Machiavelli, who were preoccupied with politics, Clausewitz was dissatisfied with certain specifically military doctrines; his main interest was how to wage and win wars. He was not interested in how to use wars in order to achieve certain political ends such as security, liberty, or democracy; nor was he concerned about how war might be contained, limited, or eradicated. Moreover, he was not interested in understanding its causes; he simply accepted that war was inevitable.<sup>57</sup>

This preoccupation reflects his historical period, personal experience, and intellectual environment. Clausewitz saw Europe radically altered by powerful political and military forces and saw his own country lose its independence and status.<sup>58</sup> He endured many terrible experiences during his own life as a soldier; these are reflected in the phrases of "dreadful vividness" that occur throughout his writing.<sup>59</sup> And he was an intellectual product of that period in European history that was noted for its reaction against the ideas of the Enlightenment and that gave rise to the notion that there ought to be something called "a theory of war."<sup>60</sup>

Fundamentally, Howard has warned, Clausewitz was a soldier writing essentially for soldiers, and too much should not be read into his work, "nor should more be expected of him than he intended to give."<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, while it seems clear that his life during the Napoleonic era tended to distort his conception of strategy and led to his emphasis on its military aspects, there are elements of his strategic theory that suffer less from his preoccupation

with the methods of his age. For example, an important element of Clausewitzian strategic theory, which is usually overlooked, is the recognition that in war "many roads lead to success" and that *they do not all involve the opponent's outright defeat*. Possible strategies include the destruction of the enemy forces; the conquest of their territory; a temporary invasion or occupation designed to cause damage; operations that have direct political repercussions (including the disruption of opposing alliances or changes in the political scene) or that increase enemy costs or suffering; and, "the most important method, judging from the frequency of its use," passively resisting the enemy's attacks in order to wear the enemy down. Any one of these strategies might be used to overcome the enemy's will: "the choice depends on circumstances."<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, Clausewitz maintains, the physical and psychological elements interact throughout. Indeed, he argues, in order to overcome an enemy, the effort made must match its power of resistance, which is the product of two inseparable factors: the total means at its disposal and the strength of its will. Even if its armed forces have been destroyed and its country occupied, he asserts, a war cannot be considered to have ended until the enemy's will has been broken.<sup>63</sup>

How adequate, then, is the strategic theory developed by Clausewitz? According to Alexander Atkinson, it is seriously flawed because of its reliance on the implicit assumption that *the social order is stable and inviolable*. Clausewitzian theory, Atkinson explains, assumes that the people of a given society are morally and socially committed (through socialization and behavioral choices) to their particular social order and that this commitment is invulnerable because the people are inaccessible to the opponent. In reality, Atkinson argues, this assumption is false. Moreover, if during war the social order is compromised, then so too is the corresponding strategy. Therefore, Atkinson concludes, Clausewitz's emphasis on the armed forces as the primary instrument of strategy and the center of gravity is quite inappropriate. Atkinson illustrates this point by reference to the Communist Chinese strategy prior to 1949. In this case, the communist guerrilla strategy was only one element of a wider political strategy that was designed to compromise the Kuo-mintang's will and power to wage war by invading and destroying their social order and replacing it with a new one. This involved, for example, the restructuring of social relations that resulted from the elimination of landlords, the seizure of their land, and its redistri-

bution to landless peasants. The point, Atkinson asserts, is that theories concerning the organization and use of armed force are unthinkable in the absence of social order and yet this social order is quite vulnerable. Therefore, he argues, social order, not the armed forces, is the ultimate source of the will and power to wage war.<sup>64</sup>

In addition, as noted earlier, the strategic theory devised by Clausewitz is anchored in his belief that war's inner logic can be found in the idea of absolute war.<sup>65</sup> This notion, however, is highly problematical. Why should the idea of absolute war explain aspects of war that might otherwise be neglected? In fact, according to Gallicie, Clausewitz failed to demonstrate this point, and in many ways his argument is "plainly fallacious."<sup>66</sup> Moreover, while Clausewitz himself discussed the shortcomings of the assumptions underpinning this notion,<sup>67</sup> as Atkinson argues at length, they "infested" his wider theory nevertheless.<sup>68</sup>

Despite the weaknesses identified above, the strengths of Clausewitz's theory lie elsewhere. For example, his recognition that policy should determine strategy is a fundamentally important element of strategic theory that has frequently been ignored or misunderstood by military personnel. However, in elaborating this theme—by making the astute distinction between the political object and the military aim—he oversimplifies the relationship between policy and strategy. Despite several oft-quoted assertions by Clausewitz that emphasize the primacy of policy,<sup>69</sup> in the view of Atkinson, Clausewitz effectively removes political considerations from strategy<sup>70</sup> when he discards the political object—"something not actually part of war itself"—in favor of the aim. This is also evident in his reduction of the aim of war to a narrowly military one—"to disarm the enemy"—and his emphasis on the use of military force—"the *means* of war"<sup>71</sup>—both of which effectively eliminate the political and other elements of strategy. Clausewitz, then, may have believed that politics determines strategy, but he did not consider it to be a *part* of strategy. "What remains peculiar to war is simply the peculiar nature of its means."<sup>72</sup> While one could argue that Clausewitz was correct to concentrate on military factors (given his attempt to write a theory of war), the point is that war itself is essentially political. Despite his statements in this regard, Clausewitz depoliticized war and wrote a theory of military strategy; he did not write a theory of war.

Moreover, it seems clear that his definitions of the political object and the military aim are themselves inadequate. This is

essentially because they are based on neither a sound analysis of the *causes* of war nor, perhaps understandably, a sound understanding of the nature of conflict. As a result, his theory is preoccupied with war as a method for dealing with conflict in the international system and does not adequately examine the wider range of strategic methods available. Liddell Hart noted this shortcoming as well. In light of his own research, and reflecting elements that are evident, but not fully developed, in Clausewitzian theory, Liddell Hart offers definitions that are more explicit in their recognition of the realities of conflict. The political object, Liddell Hart argues, is a better state of peace—"even if only from your own point of view." The true aim of war, he asserts, is *not* to seek battle; it is to seek a strategic situation that produces the desired outcome or ensures that a subsequent battle will certainly do so.<sup>73</sup>

The reasoning behind these definitions reflects Liddell Hart's interpretation of the historical record. Consider the political object. According to Liddell Hart, "the conduct of war must be controlled by reason if its object is to be fulfilled." He warns victors against appearing intent to impose a "peace" entirely of their own choosing and stresses the point that, when the military aim is achieved, defeated opponents should not be compelled to submit to onerous conditions. If they are, he suggests, then continuing instability is likely, and perhaps an attempt to reverse the original settlement.<sup>74</sup>

In relation to the military aim, Liddell Hart argues, history demonstrates that military victory is not the same as gaining the object of policy. And yet, given the predominance of military professionals in the formulation of strategy, the historical tendency has been to lose sight of the political object of war and to identify it with the military aim. In consequence, whenever war has broken out, policy has too often become "the slave of strategy." Further, by forgetting the proper relationship between policy and strategy, the military aim has often been distorted and simplified.<sup>75</sup>

In fact, the political object and the strategic aim as defined by Liddell Hart are consistent with the deepest insights of both Sun Tzu<sup>76</sup> and Clausewitz, each of whom regarded the true test of good strategy as its ability to achieve the political object without the use of military force. Nevertheless, although Clausewitz was aware of these considerations, his preoccupation was war itself and he emphasized the effectiveness of military battle.

In his discussion of the principle of polarity and the element of friction, Clausewitz reveals his vast knowledge of, and sensitivity to,

the realities of war. In war, he argued, experience counts for more than any number of abstract truths.<sup>77</sup> Thus, while in theory war should escalate to the extreme, he identified at considerable length the many reasons why in practice it does not do so. These included, importantly, his identification of the superiority of the defense over the offense—which does not mean that the best defense strategy will be chosen, that the defense is invincible, or that the defense enjoys a great advantage on the battlefield.<sup>78</sup> Many strategists have argued that the nuclear age has ushered in a period in which offensive weapons are firmly ascendant,<sup>79</sup> but this fact has no bearing on the relevance of this Clausewitzian principle, properly understood. The superiority of the defense is not historically contingent: It has nothing to do with the types of weapons that exist in a particular age.<sup>80</sup> It refers, essentially, to the capacity to choose the *type* of defense, and it remains a valid component of any strategic theory.

Similarly, the notion of the center of gravity remains valid, although there are at least two major conceptions of it. First, there is the original interpretation offered by Clausewitz, which was outlined earlier. This interpretation relies on the *universal acceptance* of the implicit assumption that the social order is stable.<sup>81</sup> And second, there is the more recent interpretation offered by Atkinson. According to this view, the center of gravity is not the armed forces (or any of the other possibilities suggested by Clausewitz). Instead, Atkinson suggests, the strategic center of gravity is the same for all combatants: It is the “finite pool of social resources” that support their strategic efforts. This conception, Atkinson explains, derives from his rejection of the assumption that the social order is stable.<sup>82</sup>

Despite these apparently divergent views, it is possible to offer a third interpretation in which the two conceptions are synthesized. According to this interpretation, the social order itself is considered to be the center of gravity, but under certain conditions the social order can choose a type of defense in order to locate its center of gravity elsewhere. Thus, if the social order appears to be stable, *and if the opponent assumes it to be so* (and, consequently, does not attack it directly), a society may choose a type of defense that shifts its center of gravity to its military forces, for example. But if for any reason (including setbacks in a war that undermine the stability of the social order) the society no longer considers the type of defense it has chosen (such as reliance on its military forces) to be the key to its survival, then the center of gravity automatically reverts to the social order itself (which might then choose another type of

defense). Of course, if the society maintains the belief that its center of gravity is in its military forces even as it approaches final defeat, then that is where the center of gravity is located and, in these circumstances, the society will be defeated. To reiterate, then, whereas Atkinson identifies the social order as the center of gravity and Clausewitz believes that the center of gravity is a product of the type of defense chosen, according to the third interpretation the social order itself is the center of gravity but, under conditions in which the social order appears to be stable and the opponent assumes it to be so (and does not attack it directly), the society can *shift* its center of gravity elsewhere by choosing certain types of defense. In this case, a society (as a result of elite manipulation or popular mobilization) might choose a type of defense that keeps the center of gravity within the social order itself. Alternatively, it might choose a type of defense that shifts the center of gravity elsewhere; at any time, however, it might abandon this defense (in which case the center of gravity reverts to the social order). The third interpretation is more consistent with the historical record than either of the other two, or so it seems.

This interpretation has important implications for other elements of Clausewitzian theory. According to Clausewitz, the center of gravity is the point around which any defense should be organized and against which any attack should be directed; moreover, the center of gravity determines which weapons are useful and which ones are useless. Therefore, one important consequence of the above interpretation of the center of gravity (especially given the insight that the social order is not stable and inviolable) is that a defense is most effective if resources are concentrated in support of the domestic social order and that attacks (with the appropriate "weapons") are most effective if they are aimed directly at the opponent's social order (rather than, say, against their military forces). In addition, irrespective of where it is located (and again in contrast to the clear-cut preference of Clausewitz), it is not essential to attack the center of gravity using military means; indeed, this can even be counterproductive. In this regard, as Howard noted, Clausewitz ignored nonmilitary possibilities—such as the possibility of using diplomatic means rather than force to neutralize an enemy's allies, or of using propaganda to undermine public support for a war.<sup>83</sup> Other possibilities will be explored in later chapters.

Finally, as noted above, Clausewitz identified the notions of power and will. Despite the clear indication that he understood the

importance of both,<sup>84</sup> there is considerable evidence to suggest that he entertained a rather simplistic understanding of the relationship between them and that he failed to realize the full strategic significance of the role of will. He discussed the strategic implications of the center of gravity (a concept concerned exclusively with power), but he did not devote similar attention to the role of will. Thus, despite his assertions regarding its importance, the notion of will has no clearly defined *strategic significance* within his theoretical framework. Moreover, Clausewitz misunderstood the relationship between power and will: He treated the latter as a function of the former. One description of the thrust of Clausewitzian reasoning goes like this: The object in war is to destroy the enemy's will to resist; its will to resist is a function of its armed forces (that is, its power to resist); therefore, its armed forces must be destroyed.<sup>85</sup> While this characterization discounts the complexity of his analysis, it does indicate the essence of his view. But, as the discussion in the next chapter and in chapter 10 will illustrate, this description of the relationship between power and will is grossly inadequate. Will is not a function of power.

It is now possible to evaluate the strategic theory developed by Clausewitz in terms of the criteria identified at the start of this chapter. First, his theory does not provide a framework for explaining the nature and causes of conflict in the international system and for identifying the causes of conflict in a particular situation. This is a serious weakness, because without this insight a theory cannot help to identify the appropriate strategic aims or offer guidelines for action that address the causes of the conflict itself. Even though Clausewitz argued that theory need not be a manual for action, he still regarded it as a "frame of reference" to guide the action to be carried out.<sup>86</sup> In any case, within the context of this study, guidance for action is a principal function of theory, and the failure of Clausewitzian theory to provide a basis for understanding the causes of conflict is an important shortcoming. Thus, while his theory does provide a framework for guiding the formulation of strategy, it does so within a context oriented to the assessment of relative military power rather than the resolution of conflict or the satisfaction of human needs. And finally, then, although his theory does provide tactical guidance, it does so within this power framework. The shortcomings of an exclusively power-oriented approach to strategy will be discussed in chapters 4 through 7.

Despite the insights it offers, the strategic theory developed by Clausewitz is inadequate. Nevertheless, four elements of his theory—the premise that strategy is an extension of society and policy, the principle of the superiority of the defense over the offense, the insight that the capacity for resistance is the product of power and will, and the concept of the center of gravity—are modified for incorporation into the strategic theory presented in chapter 8.