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# Conceptual Resilience Versus Social Utility in Strategic Thinking

Lukas Milevski

The West produces a lot of strategic thinking, most of it ad hoc responses to present stimuli not only rarely analytically or strategically useful but often damaging existing and useful strategic theory as a consequence. Lukas Milevski applies resilience to strategic theory and contrasts it with its opposite, social utility. Resilience is explained and applied to the particulars of strategic thought. The social utility of ad hoc theory is recognised, notably in attracting attention, which even militaries need to do. The tension between conceptual resilience and social utility should be reflected in strategic education so that the advantages of both are maintained.

For over a decade now, the West has been addressing questions of resilience by developing concepts and research which focus on the resilience of Western militaries, politics, societies and more in the face of contemporary dangers and threats. This has only strengthened in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Crimea and intervention in Donbas in 2014 and Russia's many subsequent disinformation and corruption campaigns.<sup>1</sup> Compound concepts such as 'deterrence by resilience'<sup>2</sup> have also arisen in attempts to determine effective ways of convincing Russia to be deterred from attacking NATO's vulnerable members on its eastern flank.

Yet, a different potential form of resilience has yet to be discussed: conceptual resilience – namely

the resilience of Western-produced (and perhaps even particularly Anglophone) strategic thought, concepts and theories, particularly those relating to Carl von Clausewitz's foundational understanding of war. Western strategic thinking may not be, on the whole, particularly resilient, which may in fact be damaging for the West's aggregate ability to think, and ultimately to perform, strategically.<sup>3</sup> Recent decades in particular have been characterised by two key factors. First, by the prominence of fashionable but ad hoc concepts, most recently those such as hybrid warfare and grey-zone conflict, which disrupt classical ways of strategic thinking which are arguably both more clear and more effective; and second, by a substantial effort from the field of strategic studies to rebuff such 'faddish' thinking.

1. Russia's subversion of the West stretches back to at least 2003–04, when a Russian-backed candidate nearly won the Lithuanian presidency through mafia connections; it has also supported many disruptive political parties throughout Europe, from Marine Le Pen's National Front (known, after 2018, as the National Rally) in France to 'Russian' parties in the Baltic states.
2. On deterrence by resilience, see, for example, Stephen J Flanagan et al., 'Deterring Russian Aggression in the Baltic States Through Resilience and Resistance', RAND Corporation, 2019.
3. On Clausewitz's foundational understanding of war, see, for example, Chiara Libiseller and Lukas Milevski, 'War and Peace: Reaffirming the Distinction', *Survival* (Vol. 63, No. 1, February/March 2021), pp. 101–12.



Conceptual resilience in strategic thinking is a key contributor to success.  
Courtesy of Pixabay

Such new concepts tend to become fashionable due to their social utility, a continuous demand which often leads to the ad hoc creation of new concepts to fit apparent fleeting needs of the day such as Russian disinformation or Chinese island-building at the expense of holistic, systemic thinking. The most popular forms of social utility may indeed be exactly opposite to the conceptual resilience of strategic thinking.

This article offers three particular definitions. First, conceptual resilience is a theoretically holistic way of thinking which enables critical examination of new concepts, their broader theoretical implications and their practical relevance. Second, social utility refers to a concept's social dimension, its relevance to and impact on human interactions apart from – albeit generally implicitly premised on – its understood analytical value. The particular character of a concept's social utility stems from its employment by its users. Finally, ad hoc thinking proposes new concepts or theoretical changes without fully engaging with existing theory, particularly when the new ideas are big and their theoretical implications for existing thought are sweeping.

This article explores the dynamic between conceptual resilience and social utility in relation

to faddish strategic thinking. It begins by discussing the roots of resilience and by developing the notion of what conceptual resilience is. It then pivots to consider social utility, what it is and what forms of it are particularly deleterious, using hybrid warfare as an example. The article ends by considering how to instil conceptual resilience in strategic studies without necessarily giving up the particular benefits which fashionable concepts can bring, particularly to military organisations. The article provides a somewhat different perspective for assessing strategic ideas, one which recognises the social and not merely the ideational/analytical dimensions of concepts.

## From Resilience to Conceptual Resilience

'Have you heard? There is a new superhero in town! Her name is Resilience and she has quickly made herself indispensable to the Security Empire'.<sup>4</sup> Over the past decade or so, resilience has become a popular concept and conceptual framework in international relations and security studies, and has to some degree leaked over into strategy and defence – not just academically but also in government

4. Myriam Dunn Cavelty, Mareile Kaufmann and Kristian Soby Kristensen, 'Resilience and (In)Security: Practices, Subjects, Temporalities', *Security Dialogue* (Vol. 46, No. 1, 2015), p. 3.

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policy and practice. This section explains the origins of resilience in other academic fields before applying it to the notion of conceptual resilience for strategic thinking.

Resilience is not a concept native to international relations, security, defence or strategy. Rather, it has been imported from a collection of mutually unrelated fields in which it has had a much longer and livelier prominence, notably engineering, ecology and psychology. Particularly in the latter two fields, resilience remains contested. The American Psychological Association has defined resilience as ‘the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress’,<sup>5</sup> but psychologists do not uniformly accept this definition. Alternative interpretations include: ‘a stable trajectory of healthy functioning after a highly adverse event’; ‘for an inanimate object, the quality of never breaking despite exposure is a good definition, but for a person, perhaps it is better to conceptualize resilience as a process of moving forward and not returning back’; and ‘the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten the viability, the function, or the development of that system’.<sup>6</sup> Although the systems interpretation of resilience is imported from ecology, it is psychology which may demonstrate the greatest variety of interpretations of resilience, including as a process, a personal or collective trait, a capacity, or an outcome.

Resilience is thus an ambiguous concept, made all the more uncertain due to disagreements over aspects of its nature and core essence. Notably, many interpretations of resilience diverge on whether it means to cope with the adverse influence and bounce back, or whether there is a further, transformative step afterwards.<sup>7</sup> As one psychologist argued:

people who are traumatized sometimes do actually end up in a better place than they started in many respects. In light of that, my current definition of resilience as it applies to people would involve a reintegration of self that includes a conscious effort to move forward in an insightful integrated positive manner as a result of lessons learned from an adverse experience. The

idea of moving forward is an important component of resilience for me because this notion recognizes that some of the most resilient people, at least that I know, may have had or still have very severe PTSD that they struggle with every day. But they don’t succumb to its negative effects.<sup>8</sup>

Nassim Nicholas Taleb introduced a similar concept, ‘antifragility’, in popular science: ‘It is far easier to figure out if something is fragile than to predict the occurrence of an event that may harm. Fragility can be measured; risk is not measurable.’<sup>9</sup> However, in proposing this concept, Taleb simplifies the resilience literature: fragility and antifragility are only characteristics.

Alongside this disagreement in understanding resilience is another distinguishing feature: whether resilience is value neutral or whether it is a desirable and ‘good’ quality for the subject to have.<sup>10</sup> Usage of resilience in Western political sciences and subordinate fields has tended to assume that it is a good quality to have, a point which has been identified by critical scholars: ‘critical resilience scholarship focuses predominantly on how resilience is situated within liberal notions of security or moves beyond it.’<sup>11</sup> It is usually understood to be preservative of the liberal West, its internal workings and its international order.

One of the relatively few areas to which resilience has not been applied is our own strategic thinking and thought: is it resilient? This is perhaps not an entirely natural question to pose, for several reasons.

First, strategic studies employs – and strategic theory represents – a very different understanding of theory than that which prevails in tangentially related fields such as international relations or security studies. In these larger fields, a theory, whether grander or lesser, tends to encompass and explain particular causal relationships with the ultimate intention of independently predicting the outcomes of those relationships from the stipulated conditions. Although each theory is its own individual system, the various systems of explanation may proliferate without end as scholars seek to craft new explanations for phenomena in international relations. By contrast, strategic theory is one whole

5. Steven M Southwick et al., ‘Resilience Definitions, Theory, and Challenges: Interdisciplinary Perspectives’, *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* (Vol. 5, No. 1, 2014), p. 2.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 2–4.
7. Lennart Olsson et al., ‘Why Resilience is Unappealing to Social Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations of the Scientific Use of Resilience’, *Science Advances* (Vol. 1, No. 4, 2015), p. 2.
8. Rachel Yehuda, cited in Southwick et al., ‘Resilience Definitions, Theory, and Challenges’, p. 3.
9. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Anti-Fragile: Things That Gain from Disorder* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 4.
10. Olsson et al., ‘Why Resilience is Unappealing to Social Science’, p. 2.
11. Dunn Cavelti, Kaufmann and Kristensen, ‘Resilience and (In)Security’, p. 6.

and systemic body of knowledge about war and strategy which seeks to describe the phenomena at hand and to explore their interrelationships, primarily for educative purposes. The user of this single comprehensive theory then applies their theoretical knowledge to make their own strategic judgement. This understanding of theory ultimately stems from Clausewitz, who argued that theory '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'.<sup>12</sup> The consequence of this divergence between many competing systems and one overarching systemic theory is that conceptual/theoretical resilience is less relevant to international relations or security studies than to strategic studies. Each field's theories are systemic, but currently only strategic studies is characterised by the ambition to develop a field-comprehensive systemic theory. For this reason, ad hoc thinking is more threatening to strategic studies than to international relations or security studies as it threatens the basis of the whole field.

Second, despite the preferences of neo-Clausewitzians who substantially, if not fully, adopt Clausewitz's theory of war as a foundation for contemporary strategic thought (among whom the author counts himself), it is not necessarily self-evident that this existing theory is optimal or even appropriate for today's strategic challenges. The repetitious challenges made against Clausewitzian theory, from at least as early as B H Liddell Hart to at least as recent as Martin van Creveld, Mary Kaldor and John Keegan,<sup>13</sup> demonstrate this point. Clausewitz's challengers all dispute, to some degree, his present authority and relevance. Similarly, ad hoc advocacy of new concepts such as 'hybrid' or 'grey-zone' warfare also implies some level of disbelief in the contemporary relevance of existing theory or its component concepts, including such basic distinctions as that between war and peace. This article does not engage with or justify the present relevance of Clausewitzian theory, properly understood, despite acknowledging disagreements

over its authority. Nonetheless, this contentious issue clearly highlights the normative implications of resilience: is preserving existing theory in a recognisable state good and beneficial for strategic studies and for strategy in practice? This author's position is yes, as discussed in other articles.<sup>14</sup>

One may claim with considerable justification that Clausewitzian-founded strategic theory has already demonstrated its resilience, as strategic studies is perhaps unique among academic fields for relying on a text so old. In part, this resilience is a function of the field's unique approach to theory; much of the foundation may be modified without imperilling its Clausewitzian nature. Yet, the mainstream interpretation of Clausewitz is only 50 years old and is rife with modern cultural analyses which ensure its popularity despite lacking textual accuracy and circumscribing aspects of the theory's fullness.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, resilience has a crucial diachronic characteristic: ideally, strategic theory is resilient not just over time but also at particular points in time, in the face of new geopolitical or conceptual challenges. Existing theory appears resilient over time but not necessarily at particular times.

Finally, irrespective of discipline, resilience has been generally conceived as a response to *external* adverse influences. In the context of strategic thought, the dynamic is more complicated. There is usually an external trigger to widespread changes in thinking. As Raymond Aron observed, 'strategic thought draws its inspiration each century, or rather at each moment of history, from the problems which events themselves pose'.<sup>16</sup> These external triggers may even have substantial emotional effects which drive theoretical revision.<sup>17</sup> Yet, the ultimate stress against which strategic thought should be resilient is not external but internal: strategic thinkers adapting their thinking, concepts and theories in ad hoc ways which make sense to them in the context of understanding either the external challenge or how to respond effectively to that external challenge. Thus, the adverse influence is internal, by analogy

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12. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 578.
  13. B H Liddell Hart, *The Ghost of Napoleon* (London: Faber & Faber, 1933); Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1991); Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006); John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1994).
  14. Libiseller and Milevski, 'War and Peace'.
  15. Hew Strachan, 'Michael Howard and Clausewitz', *Journal of Strategic Studies* (Vol. 45, No. 1, 2022), pp. 143–60.
  16. Raymond Aron, 'The Evolution of Modern Strategic Thought', in Alastair Buchan (ed.), *Problems of Modern Strategy: Part One*, Adelphi Paper 54 (London: IISS, 1969), p. 7.
  17. Samuel Zilincik, 'Technology is Awesome, But So What?! Exploring the Relevance of Technologically Inspired Awe to the Construction of Military Theories', *Journal of Strategic Studies* (Vol. 45, No. 1, 2022), pp. 5–32.

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akin to the danger posed by the 1918 influenza which triggered immune systems to go into overdrive, killing the healthy young whose own immune systems should have saved them or kept them safe.

Given the lack of consensus on how best to understand resilience even in fields where it has been an enduring conceptual fixture, the question of how to translate it into specifically *conceptual* resilience is important. Conceptual resilience – let alone antifragility – cannot be an outcome or even a characteristic of strategic theory. Unlike a physical or even an institutional system, which to varying degrees exists in the physical world and so may be measurably fragile or antifragile, theories are purely mental and so their perceived fragility is an entirely individual judgement. Thinkers may always disagree with existing theory, rightly or wrongly, especially in response to ongoing events. No characteristic of theory can or should preclude diverging thought; improvement comes only from divergence. Conceptual resilience is not a process either, although process is an inherent part of it, involving dynamic interactions among existing theory, new concepts and thinkers impelled by external forces to advocate for these, often at the expense of existing theory. Instead, given the abstract, ideational orientation of conceptual resilience, its foundation must be a systemic way of thinking. This entails recognising that strategic thought forms (or should form) a coherent and reasonably effective system of knowledge – one which can be negatively affected by ad hoc conceptual fads which unsettle that system and confuse relationships, such as those between war and peace.

When discussing conceptual resilience, it is crucial to ascertain what it is *not*. It is not conceptual stasis, where thinking does not change. Clausewitzian theory, the foundation, is insufficient on its own and must be further developed and, at times, also corrected. Awareness of strategic theory as an ideally coherent body of knowledge about war and strategy does not preclude its continued development, but does require that development take place with an awareness of how the whole system is affected. In light of the definitional dispute in other fields concerning resilience as strictly either coping and bouncing back or transforming, this discussion of conceptual resilience is limited to the former; further transformational development of strategic theory is distinct from the question of resilience. Resilience in ecology or psychology is relatively

linear (as, for example, psychologists can identify characteristics of mentally healthier behaviour, and ecologists know what more robust ecosystems look like). This is untrue of strategic theory. Instead, challengers and defenders both seek to improve theory as they individually understand it. By contrast with ecology or psychology, the transformational character of resilience can still lead theory in almost any direction, many of which will be just as arguable and controversial as the challenge just rebuffed. In the ideational context, transformative resilience and Taleb's antifragility concept are both implausible.

Conceptual resilience clearly concerns academic strategists, who are key, scholarly users of strategic theory often constituting the field's bulwark against faddish strategic thinking. Yet, conceptual resilience is also important for military and policy professionals using strategic theory in their day jobs in the way Clausewitz intended, as a foundation for further thinking and ultimate practice. Moreover, conceptual resilience is also highly relevant to those who teach strategy, whether at civilian universities or professional military education institutions, who are crucially placed to instil through education ways of thinking that engender conceptual resilience in future strategic thinkers.

### Socially Useful Concepts

For strategic thinking, social utility often comes at the expense of systemic thinking and so may be considered the opposite of conceptual resilience. In strategic studies, the social utility of strategic theory has long been taken for granted, leading to its relative neglect in academic study. This condition is slowly changing as strategic studies' continuous conceptual churning of the past 30 years – involving concepts such as the revolution in military affairs, network-centric warfare, effects-based operations, hybrid warfare and grey-zone warfare – has spurred questions concerning how and why such concepts emerge and how they relate to more fundamental strategic theories.<sup>18</sup>

Social utility may initially seem to be an outlying distraction for strategic thinking, which has always been practical since development of the first military treatises in the ancient world. Bernard Brodie made perhaps the strongest modern statement on the connection between thought and practice when he boldly argued that 'strategic thinking, or "theory"

18. Murat Caliskan, 'Hybrid Warfare Through the Lens of Strategic Theory: Based on Interviews with NATO Officials', unpublished PhD thesis, Université Catholique de Louvain, 2021; Chiara Libiseller, 'Reconceptualising War: The Rise and Fall of Fashionable Concepts in Strategic Studies', unpublished PhD thesis, King's College London, 2022.

if one prefers, is nothing if not pragmatic. Strategy is a “how to do it” study, a guide to accomplishing something and doing it efficiently ... Above all, strategic theory is a theory for action.’ He concludes this line of thought by asking: ‘what could strategic theory possibly be for if it were not meant to be transferable to the world of action?’<sup>19</sup> The importance of relating theory to practice is widely accepted, as the horizon of the practical anchors strategic theory to reality.

Yet, social utility comprises various dissimilar facets. Those implied by most works of strategic theory emphasise issues such as the actual practice of strategy, the conduct of military campaigns, battlefield tactics and formations, and – more prominently in pre-modern strategic theory – force structure and design. These forms of utility for strategic theory are not controversial. However, such a list does not even begin to touch on what appears to be the primary form of social utility displayed by recent concepts such as hybrid warfare: to command attention, especially political, and spur political and bureaucratic effort. Notably, Beatrice Heuser’s mighty tome on the evolution of strategy ends by contrasting strategy-making and bureaucratic politics.<sup>20</sup> One might make a similar distinction between strategic thinking and bureaucratic, or other forms of, politics. What is good for one is not necessarily good for the other, although direct contradiction is not logically inherent (albeit empirically frequent) in such relationships.

Hybrid warfare is an excellent example of this particular form of social utility. The concept has been roundly criticised for: claiming novelty without actually being new; being too broad and ambiguous; having little operational value and not actually affecting how NATO prepares for conflict; and confusing the existing system of knowledge about strategy and war to the detriment of useful strategic thinking and ultimately of effective strategic practice.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, this concept has proven to

be surprisingly (and perhaps ironically) resilient. It may remain in fashion not because of its strategic or academic value, but because it is effective for communication. Hybrid warfare transfixes public and especially political attention, enabling militaries to claim more (perhaps much needed) resources to bolster national or alliance defence.<sup>22</sup> Such attention may in turn increase political pressure on and jolt semi-ossified military or alliance bureaucracies running merely on autopilot. In consensus-driven decision-making as in NATO, a fashionable concept such as hybrid warfare rallies political and bureaucratic attention and support despite its otherwise lack of utility.<sup>23</sup>

Concepts which are socially useful in this way – emerging in response to immediate events, riding fashions, and garnering prominent political and public attention – are the product of ad hoc thinking, which runs counter to established strategic theory. This exhibits an attitude which unnecessarily privileges the present over historical experience and may afflict policymakers, military professionals and civil servants, academics and the public alike. Many in strategic studies have warned against this attitude, whereas others have criticised academia writ large for incentivising the frenzied pursuit of academic novelty.<sup>24</sup> As Aron observed, the importance of contemporary events for strategic thinking is unavoidable and it may be constructive. Yet, much, if not most, present-moment inspired strategic thinking of recent decades has been ad hoc and arguably damaging rather than constructively improving the existing system of strategic knowledge, from the revolution in military affairs to hybrid warfare and grey-zone warfare. Nonetheless, the social utility of such concepts may be disproportionate to their actual theoretical value in strategic studies as a system of knowledge, or even just for informing actual strategic practice.

Military professionals tend to be both the primary users of concepts such as hybrid warfare and also

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19. Bernard Brodie, *War & Politics* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 452–53.
  20. Beatrice Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chap. 19.
  21. See, for example, Robert Johnson, ‘Hybrid War and Its Countermeasures: A Critique of the Literature’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* (Vol. 29, No. 1, 2018), pp. 141–63; Mark Galeotti, ‘Hybrid, Ambiguous, and Non-Linear? How New is Russia’s “New Way of War”?’ *Small Wars & Insurgencies* (Vol. 27, No. 2, 2016), pp. 282–301.
  22. See, for example, Murat Caliskan and Michel Liégeois, ‘The Concept of “Hybrid Warfare” Undermines NATO’s Strategic Thinking: Insights from Interviews with NATO Officials’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* (Vol. 32, No. 2, 2021), pp. 295–319.
  23. Caliskan, ‘Hybrid Warfare Through the Lens of Strategic Theory’, pp. 155–59.
  24. On the former, see Colin S Gray, *Strategy & Defence Planning: Meeting the Challenge of Uncertainty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 203; on the latter, see Giovanni Sartori, ‘The Tower of Babel’, in Giovanni Sartori, Fred W Riggs and Henry Teune (eds), *Tower of Babel: On the Definition and Analysis of Concepts in the Social Sciences* (Pittsburgh, PA: International Studies Association, 1975), p. 9.

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their originators, for the simple reason that it can be difficult to achieve goals in a context dominated by both military bureaucracy and political pressure. Picking up cues from their military advisers, policymakers follow suit. Professional and policy attention attracts funding, in turn drawing in academics eager for profit, prestige and impact. Yet, the military origin of these new concepts usually betrays their ad hoc character. In 1949, Bernard Brodie observed that military professionals are only infrequently prepared, and even more rarely paid, to think holistically about strategic theory.<sup>25</sup> This has not changed much. Through the constant generation of novel and fashionable ideas, the military can imperil the conceptual resilience of strategic theory.

This trend reflects an inherent problem of bifurcation between theory and practice or, if one prefers, between strategy and defence or even war and peace. Strategy is the realm of action and is amenable to, and benefits from, systemic thinking about the conduct of war for political purpose. Defence, by contrast, is the realm of preparing for action through policy and planning in a highly political, generally peacetime environment. They should be inseparable, but often are not: ‘the complex problem of running an army at all is liable to occupy his mind and skill so completely that it is very easy to forget what it is being run *for*’.<sup>26</sup> The military is caught between strategy and defence: as the main instrument of defence it conducts most of its quotidian business within that policy/planning sphere, but as the main instrument of strategy in practice, it also pays due attention to strategy and strategic studies. The military, caught between two stools, is unable to sit on both simultaneously and is sometimes unable to switch nimbly between them as necessary.

### Instilling Conceptual Resilience

If conceptual resilience is desirable, how might it be instilled in strategic studies? The study of resilience across multiple unrelated fields demonstrates that its practice is not necessarily easy, and that achieving a definitive, resilient outcome is unrealistic; resilience cannot be a one-time achievement – especially in

something as complex as an entire discipline with academic and practitioner components.

Key challenges face those trying to preserve and contribute to the resilience of strategic theory. First, contemporary events are an unending challenge, often but not always leading to the development of new, usually ad hoc, concepts and thinking. It is easy to cross the line from drawing inspiration from the present to being dominated by it. One may invoke Harold Macmillan’s attitude concerning the greatest challenge to his prime ministership: ‘events, dear boy, events’. Second, even among those prepared to defend existing strategic theory, there is not always an appetite to think, argue and justify systemically. Donald Stoker and Craig Whiteside, for example, launched a vigorous attack on the thinking encapsulated in concepts such as hybrid warfare, with a concomitant defence of classical strategic thinking. Yet, their argument – although powerful – was still made from a position already assuming the authority of strategic theory rather than demonstrating afresh for an audience itself unconvinced of that theory’s authority and relevance, as indicated by its acceptance of alternative concepts.<sup>27</sup>

The record suggests that previously existing, particularly Clausewitz-based, strategic theory is liable to be challenged every generation. Eschewing the possibility of definitive outcomes, instilling resilience can aim to create educative processes which encourage thinking about, and being able to employ analytically, the whole system of existing strategic theory. The resilience of strategic theory must start with education. For example, B H Liddell Hart originally described Clausewitz as the ‘mahdi of mass and mutual massacre’.<sup>28</sup> This attitude changed and he eventually acknowledged that his problem was not with Clausewitz but rather with his subsequent disciples and interpreters: ‘As so often happens, Clausewitz’s disciples carried his teaching to an extreme which their master had not intended’, implicitly recognising that the issue was how Clausewitz was being taught and understood.<sup>29</sup> How theory is taught matters for how it is understood, and therefore for how resilient it is in the face of novel ideas – even if the theory itself has not changed.

Indeed, the version of Clausewitz (and, more generally, the strategic theory) widely taught

25. Bernard Brodie, ‘Strategy as a Science’, *World Politics* (Vol. 1, No. 4, July 1949), pp. 467–88.

26. Michael Howard, ‘The Use and Abuse of Military History’, *Parameters* (Vol. 11, No. 1, March 1981), p. 13.

27. Donald Stoker and Craig Whiteside, ‘Blurred Lines: Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War – Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking’, *Naval War College Review*, pp. 13–48.

28. Liddell Hart, *The Ghost of Napoleon*, p. 120.

29. B H Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York, NY: Meridian, 1991), p. 339.

professionally is simultaneously among the least and most resilient versions. Both Clausewitz and strategic theory more broadly are often stylised in ways which typically take conventional war as the ideal and everything else as usually undesirable and maybe even unintelligible deviation. This turns every attempt by an enemy to gain asymmetric advantage into a challenge to the West's overly stylised understanding of war. It is not a sustainable and resilient way of developing, teaching or employing strategic theory. Nonetheless, despite the flaws of this interpretation, it remains the most accessible and fashionable; it is ironically resilient against attempts to improve it.

As the primary consumer of most fashionable – and fashionably disruptive – strategic concepts, the military can also become a key contributor to the resilience of strategic theory. Indeed, because of the military's tendency to stylise war and warfare in its own thinking and education, it probably has the single largest role to play in improving conceptual resilience in strategic thinking and studies. The most important arena is professional military education (PME), a contentious topic which draws much commentary. One recent article has taken aim at PME, focusing primarily on its use of history:

[A] narrow focus on specific examples of warfighting abstracted from their context does little for students' broader intellectual development, or their comprehension of war in its fullest sense. If history is to have value in PME, it must remain connected to the philosophical basis of the historical discipline and encourage students to engage with the complex nature of war itself.<sup>30</sup>

The two authors continue by emphasising, from the historian's perspective and without using the specific term, conceptual resilience:

In order for [the history of war] to play a role in modern military education, it is important to appreciate 'history' not merely as a record of events, but as a way of organising knowledge – in other words to understand the philosophy which underpins how historians study the past.<sup>31</sup>

Systemic theory is how knowledge is most usefully organised, whereas ad hoc thinking often disrupts such theory and therefore similarly disrupts

how the past is understood. Systemic theory and good history reinforce and build on each other.

Yet, the task is not entirely straightforward, due to the military's bifurcated focus: it needs not just to behave strategically when necessary but also to act comfortably in the peacetime environments of defence, which may require relying on communicating fashionable concepts to attract attention and money. Abandoning fashionable concepts simply because they are ad hoc and do not fit into or even actively disrupt the system of strategic knowledge can only be partially, not completely, productive. In reality, both may be necessary but it is crucial to understand their respective qualities.

Teaching theory appropriately is not easy or straightforward, and it often demands much from both faculty and students. It must, at minimum, encompass and emphasise three key features. First are the concepts themselves, including the definitions of war, strategy and tactics, among others. Second are their interrelationships: for instance, how does war relate to politics, how does it relate to peace, and how do strategy and politics interact? These provide structure to strategic theory, but are insufficient on their own.

A key, third aspect is an exploration of the logic which infuses and underpins concepts and their interrelationships. For example, what are the distinct conceptual features of Clausewitz's page-one definition of war? What do these distinct conceptual features mean individually, and what do they mean when put together into a single concept? How (and why) do they reflect the phenomena they are meant to define, and how well do they do it? Similar questions may be asked of the relationships among concepts. Montesquieu described theory as a machine, where individual parts may appear to be mutually contradictory when viewed in isolation from the whole:

When a work is systematic, it is necessary to be sure that one grasps well the system entire. You look on a great machine made to produce an effect. You see the wheels turn in directions opposed; at first glance, you would believe that the machine will destroy itself, that all the turning will get in its own way, that the machine will bring itself to a halt. But it goes on forever: these fragments, which seem in the beginning to destroy each other, unite together for the object proposed.<sup>32</sup>

30. Louis Halewood and David Morgan-Owen, 'Captains of War: History in Professional Military Education', *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 165, No. 7, 2020), p. 50.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

32. Montesquieu, quoted in Paul A Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern, Volume II: New Modes and Orders in Early Modern Political Thought* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), p. 17.

## Conceptual Resilience Versus Social Utility in Strategic Thinking

The goal is not to turn military professionals into academic theorists, but into responsible users who can see the whole machine. Understanding the whole logic of concepts enables their appropriate use in analysis and applied strategic thinking. Only by understanding such underpinning logic can conceptual resilience in strategic thinking be improved.

In this context, new fashionable concepts should still be taught, but not as if they were necessarily strategically or analytically useful (their usefulness is usually much contested and rather dubious) but rather as marketing instruments. Usually, this perspective best reflects their actual social utility, as demonstrated by the example of hybrid warfare. Of course, analyses of fashionable concepts similarly rely on exploring the same conceptual questions enunciated above. Not every new concept, even if fashionable and ad hoc, is necessarily incompatible with the existing system of strategic knowledge. Those that are incompatible, however, must be employed not analytically but primarily for their instrumental value in the politics, processes and procedures of defence. Presenting, discussing and teaching such concepts from this perspective preserves their main value and minimises the disruption they may cause to strategic theory as a whole.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, not all concepts are equal. While some fit, or can be made to fit, comfortably into the existing system of knowledge about war and

strategy, others will not. Concepts may be useful in various contexts, within the particular distinction made here between the actual practice of strategy and conduct of military campaigns on one hand and the politics of defence policy, planning and budgeting on the other. In such a dual context, conflating the respective values of concepts, as though identical, is deleterious to the resilience of Western strategic thinking. Fortunately, this can be addressed through a more rigorous approach to thinking about and teaching concepts and theory.

A thoughtful approach does not merely consist of the rote understanding of concepts, their definitions and their interrelationships, but relies instead on exploration of the actual logic underpinning how these were constructed and the ways in which this reflects real world phenomena. Such an approach would allow for clear differentiation between analytically useful and marketing-instrumental concepts, and thereby also the responsible use of either and both as necessary without confusing ourselves in the process. Ultimately, this form of conceptual resilience is not an outcome but inherent in the processes by which we interact with and employ our concepts and theories. ■

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