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Milevski, L.

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Clausewitz at the nexus of competing fashions in Western strategic thought

Lukas Milevski

Institute for History, Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands

ABSTRACT

The history of strategic thought is well trodden ground, but has not been approached from a fashion perspective. This article focuses on the issue of engagement among intellectual fashions by examining how events may lead observers to believe that established, long cycle ways of thinking have become partially, if not wholly, inapt, thereby leading to an uncertain and perhaps incomprehensible strategic environment. Newer, revisionist but often short-lived concepts emerge as a consequence, variously complementary to, despite, or in direct repudiation of longer-lived concepts or theories. This dynamic is examined through the interaction between Clausewitzian and competing fashions.

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Western strategic studies are rife with intellectual fads and fashions, although histories of strategic thought to date have rarely engaged substantively with fashionableness as a dimension of that thought. The result is usually a study of the procession of notable strategic thought, lacking systematic examination of how or why certain perspectives became popular or unpopular, why some endure in the mainstream and others do not. Further, such processional studies may not engage with how various strands of thought engage with each other, particularly those between long-lasting systemic theories of strategy or war and emergent, ad hoc concepts directed at specific contemporary challenges.

This article focuses on the issue of engagement among intellectual fashions by examining how events may lead observers to believe that established, long cycle ways of thinking have become partially, if not wholly, inapt, thereby leading to an uncertain and perhaps incomprehensible strategic environment. Newer, revisionist but often short-lived concepts emerge as

CONTACT Lukas Milevski  lukasmilevski@gmail.com

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a consequence, variously complementary to, despite, or in direct repudiation of longer-lived concepts or theories. The current intellectual environment of modern strategic studies, born and living under the dominion of the Clausewitz long cycle fashion, reflects this dynamic ideational ferment.

To explore fashionable strategic thought, this article discusses fashion theory and the characteristics of fashion, encompassing fashion lifecycles, fashion spread, the notion of informational cascades, and their adaption to the particular subject of strategic thinking. The second step traces the Clausewitzian long cycle fashion, which is taken as the primary case study for interaction and engagement among fashions. Third, short cycle fashions which engage with Clausewitz are examined to draw a picture in which theoretical styles fail for social reasons, fashions emerge to repudiate other fashions, and characteristics which were distinctly fashionable at one time in other geopolitical contexts become quite unfashionable. Ultimately, fashionable interpretations of the Clausewitzian long cycle fashion both rise and fall as a result of informational cascades triggered by external events in the geopolitical and strategic context.

Fashion and strategic thought

Fashion is its own field of practice, focusing on clothing, accessories, etc. The study of fashion is of interdisciplinary interest, touching upon fields such as marketing, business, and, now, strategic thought. The deepest exploration of fashion centres on two features: its temporal lifecycles and its spread.

Temporally limited lifespans are definitionally central to fashion; they lead to two key interrelated theoretical discussions. First is the study of fashion lifecycles – crucial for the fashion industry, whose actors seek to initiate, ride, manipulate, and predict those lifecycles. Sproles has observed that '[f]ashion theory has developed around two time frames, long run cycles, the secular evolution of one style to the next, spanning decades and centuries, and short run cycles, the seasonal acceptance of a single style during a period of months to years'.¹ Those in the industry work with short cycle fashions, within the context of long cycle fashions; the former are more immediately malleable, the latter much less so. The relationship between long and short is constitutive, i.e., the only way to understand the long cycle is to pay attention to the succession of short cycles and notice the resultant trend: 'long run data on design history point only to the gross, broadly defined parameters of change. Thus, a long run trend in skirt lengths or auto lengths may be apparent when decades of data are observed in aggregate, but the data

¹George B. Sproles, 'Analyzing Fashion Lifecycles – Principles and Perspectives', *Journal of Marketing* 45 (Fall 1981), 117.

indicate year-to-year variations may be more violent and perhaps random'.² This perspective denies the possibility of a long cycle fashion in the absence of evolving short-term change which point consistently, albeit not necessarily constantly, in a given direction.

Eric Abrahamson and Alessandro Piazza offer a different perspective on lifecycles through study of management ideas. Eschewing the long/short cycle dichotomy, they instead conceptualise a relationship between abstract and specific ideas. The longer-lasting but still cyclical former create conditions which allow the latter to emerge. Compared to Sproles' long/short distinction, Abrahamson and Piazza reverse the relationship between abstract and specific. In their understanding, the latter belong to the former: 'questions about the lifecycle of *specific* management ideas are hard to address without considering the lifecycle of *abstract* management ideas which these specific ideas belong to'.³

The second key theoretical discussion concerning fashions, intimately associated with all aspects of a fashion's lifecycle from rise in popularity to maturity and finally to eventual decline, is its spread. Three broad categories of theory have been identified: trickle down, trickle up, and trickle across. In the first, the 'leisure class' whom others try to emulate adopts fashions, which then percolate more broadly. In the second, elites adopt fashions from limited subcultures, whereas in the third fashions flow across social classes or other groups which share similar preferences.⁴ Fashion experts hold that most often, new fashions emerge out of or are inspired by previous fashions, although it is also recognised that external events or developments can, and historically have, influenced fashion, including prompting new fashions to emerge.⁵

Yet events may instigate a sense of uncertainty. A particularly interesting theory of fashion change frames it as an informational cascade in a low-information environment:

In our model, individuals rapidly converge on one action on the basis of some but very little information. If even a little new information arrives, suggesting that a different course of action is optimal, or if people even suspect that underlying circumstances have changed (whether or not they really have), the social equilibrium may radically shift. Our model, which is based on what we call 'informational cascades', explains not only conformity but also rapid and short-lived fluctuations such as fads, fashions, booms, and crashes. In the theories of conformity discussed earlier, small shocks lead to big shifts in mass behavior only if people happen to be very close to the borderline between alternatives.

²Ibid.

³Eric Abrahamson and Alessandro Piazza, 'The Lifecycle of Management Ideas: Innovation, Diffusion, Institutionalization, Dormancy, and Rebirth', in Andrew Sturdy, Stefan Heusinkveld, Trish Reay, and David Strang (eds.), *The Handbook of Management Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2019), 47.

⁴Eundeok Kim, Anne Marie Fiore, and Hyejeong Kim, *Fashion Trends: Analysis and Forecasting* (London: Berg 2011), 12–13.

⁵Ibid., 4.

Informational cascades explain why society, on the basis of little information, will systematically tend to land close to the borderline, causing fragility.⁶

Unfortunately, the authors say little which is intelligible about the conditions under which low-information environments occur. However, it seems reasonable to suggest that external shocks may induce such an apparent environment in which some actor, behaving with apparent informational certainty, may trigger a cascade of emulation.

Most of these observations on fashion lifecycle, spread, and informational cascade in response to external events can be adapted to explain the high level of conceptual dynamism within strategic studies. Such an explanation begins with two elements: an on-going long cycle fashionable strategic theory and a major disruptive event. Events are crucial; they are recognised as playing a much larger role in intellectual change in strategic studies than in fashion. Raymond Aron goes so far as to suggest that events are *the* defining influence on strategic thought: '[s]trategic thought draws its inspiration each century, or rather at each moment of history, from the problems which events themselves pose'.⁷ Even if the study of informational cascades in fashion itself does not necessarily connect external influences such as shocking events and low-information environments, there exists nonetheless a clear connection in the specific context of strategic thinking.

Disruptive events throw into doubt the veracity and utility of existing long cycle strategic thought. If strategic thought were apt, then it should have anticipated, explained, and controlled the event rather than allowed it to disrupt the geopolitical status quo. (Whether or not such criticisms are apt is a different question!) Thus, the disruptive event creates an apparently low-information environment, i.e., one in which existing ways of thinking appear inadequate. Fundamentally, new concepts emerge due to dissatisfaction with present thinking. Every new concept represents a rejection of the previous system of concepts and thinking, or some specific feature thereof. There may even be an emotional thread to this conceptual dissatisfaction, compelling thinkers to abandon old in favour of new thinking.⁸ The Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 is exemplary of a disruptive event which put into doubt particular features of the dominant system of strategic thinking and led to the popularization of a born-again concept: hybrid warfare.

At this point in the cycle, strategy-relevant communities and conceptual/theoretical style become prominent. The question of *who* adopts and employs

⁶Sushil Bikchandani, David Hirshleifer, and Ivo Welch, 'A Theory of Fads, Fashion, Custom, and Cultural Change as Informational Cascades', *Journal of Political Economy* 100/5 (1992), 994.

⁷Raymond Aron, 'The Evolution of Modern Strategic Thought', in Alastair Buchan (ed.), *Problems of Modern Strategy: Part One*, Adelphi Paper 54. (London: IISS 1969), 7.

⁸See for example 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* 45/1 (2022), 5–32.

new concepts in reaction to events matters. Identity of individuals or organisations is related to their credibility and generation of publicity, both of which are crucial in a low-information environment. In this way, events may even encourage the field's version of product placement, which would be a concept's explicit use in prominent professional venues, such as the popularisation of hybrid war via a July 2014 video for *NATO Review* which, together with NATO's summit in Wales in September 2014, became a catalyst for the immediate popularisation of the concept in Europe.⁹ In the low-information environment caused by Russia's purportedly ambiguous invasion and annexation of Crimea, NATO possessed both the credibility and status to generate publicity, inadvertently popularising a concept.

Conceptual or theoretical style is similarly crucial. In strategic thought, the fundamental stylistic choice is systemic versus ad hoc. Systemic thought is that which provides a distinct and sufficiently comprehensive framework – within the author's limits of ambition – by which one can systematically understand the relevant aspects of the world. By contrast, ad hoc thinking represents concepts developed to understand specific issues in their immediate contexts. Some ad hoc thinking is generated from a basis of systemic thinking, but much ad hoc thinking is actually generated in opposition to the current foundation of strategic thought. Due to its innate style, systemic thinking generally enjoys a longer lifecycle, whereas ad hoc thinking is usually more event-driven, ephemeral, and faddish.

The interplay between both approaches results in a dynamic intellectual environment, in which events may often appear to discredit existing long cycle strategic thought and so trigger an informational cascade, and thereby leading to the generation of fashionable ad hoc thinking, sometimes based on an outright rejection of the long cycle system of thought. This reflects relationships between long and short cycles which are more than merely constitutive or reflective. New strategic thought might emerge complementary to, despite, or in opposition to existing thought, including the systemic, long cycle fashion which provides context for the churn among the smaller, shorter-term ideas. The long cycle of the Clausewitzian-founded system of thought has, over the past century or so, been at the nexus of competing currents in fashionable strategic thought.

Clausewitz as the present systemic, long cycle fashion

Prior to the current Clausewitzian long cycle, at least three previous long cycle fashions within strategic studies are identifiable stretching back to the fifteenth century. One may discuss fashionable strategic thinking prior to the Renaissance only with difficulty.¹⁰ Before the printing press, manuscripts of any sort were

⁹'Hybrid War – Hybrid Response?' *NATO Review*, 1 July 2014, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2014/07/01/hybrid-war-hybrid-response/index.html>, accessed 27 Oct. 2021.

¹⁰Although, contrary to common belief in strategic studies, the Middle Ages certainly experienced novel strategic thought, see John D. Hosler, 'Reframing the Conversation on Medieval Military Strategy', *Journal of Medieval Military History* 16 (2018), 189–205.

comparatively rare and, in historical terms, relatively easily lost. Historians know of the existence of numerous military treatises stretching back to Hellenic Greece, but they no longer exist or, if they do, they have not yet been discovered. The effect is identical. While historians of strategic thought consider themselves blessed for every manuscript which survives from those ages, it is difficult to think in terms of fashion, which requires assessing popularity.

The Renaissance emerged in the fifteenth century and was substantially defined by early humanism and repopularisation of the classical world of ancient Greece and the Roman Empire. Although military theory was not a humanist concern, it also rediscovered antiquity and sought to identify crucial lessons from the ancients for contemporary warfare. Machiavelli (1469–1527), one of those who initiated this fashionable return to the ancients in military thought, semi-identified himself in *Art of War* with the character Fabrizio Colonna, a mercenary captain, who stated at the outset ‘I will never part from my Romans as the example for anything’.¹¹ This antiquarian fashion in military thought caught on partly due to the extant popularity of studying the ancients in wider society. For the better part of two centuries, recourse to the ancients’ wisdom proved to be the most enduring system of engaging with strategy and the other problems of war.

By the late 17th century, antiquity-inspired humanism had declined – again, in wider culture – in favour of the Enlightenment, with its concerted attempt to systematise and rationalise humankind’s understanding of the world, and at time even to impose rationality upon it. Strategic theory did not escape this impulse, particularly in France. The French general Maurice de Saxe (1696–1750) reflected basic attitudes of the Enlightenment when he lamented what he considered the shoddy state of military theory and sought to revamp it himself; for de Saxe, the greatest flaw of earlier theory was its inspiration to be universal with little consideration for the particularities of any given tactical or strategic situation.¹² Others thought and acted similarly. Following the insight that fashions often emerge out of preceding fashions, the transition from studying the ancients to the Enlightenment was slow to the extent that some, such as de Saxe, straddled both fashions.¹³ Enlightenment military theories were popular throughout Enlightenment society, particularly in France, and such thinkers could and did become celebrities in their own right besides also effecting real change in the management and employment of the French armed forces. Yet by the end of the eighteenth century, certain strands of Enlightenment military thinking had

¹¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Art of War*. Christopher Lynch, (trans.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2003), 11.

¹² See Christy Pichichero, *The Military Enlightenment: War and Culture in the French Empire from Louis XIV to Napoleon* (Ithaca: Cornell UP 2017), 41.

¹³ See Donald A. Neill, ‘Ancestral Voices: The Influence of the Ancients on the Military Thought of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries’, *The Journal of Military History* 62/3 (July 1998), 487–520.

ossified into a new universalism focused on the geometricisation of strategy, most notably by the Welshman Henry Humphries Evan Lloyd and the German Heinrich Dietrich von Bülow.¹⁴ Such ossified thought was vulnerable, and shattered in the face of a major change in strategic affairs: French Revolutionary and Napoleonic modes of warfare.

These new modes of warfare represented, in part, the apogee of Enlightenment thinking about war, while also eviscerating those mathematical and geometrical theories of strategy which had emerged as the most radical examples of Enlightenment systemisation. Napoleon, inheriting French military reforms from earlier decades, pioneered a novel way of campaigning which he himself arguably did not fully understand. Others cautiously tread after him, occasionally drawing back from fear of this new vision of warfare. Among them was Archduke Charles of Austria, who experimented with Napoleonic command during the War of the Fifth Coalition before returning to the comfort zone of the previous style of strategy and command.¹⁵ Yet, despite Napoleon's ultimate defeat, the shock of wars as he waged them could not be contained and European military thought plunged into uncertainty over how to interpret revolutionary and Napoleonic warfare theoretically. Into this low-information environment, so primed for such an informational cascade as this, stepped two men, both veterans of the wars: the Swiss-born Antoine-Henri, the Baron de Jomini, and the Prussian Carl von Clausewitz.

During the Napoleonic Wars, Jomini served primarily with the French, and published his *Traité des Grandes Opérations Militaires* in 1805, which went through numerous editions. His subsequent works would be equally popular, notably also finding much favour with the Americans throughout the 19th century, both in practice and in informing theory, including Alfred Thayer Mahan's theory of sea power. His success is easily understandable from his style. He proffered positive doctrine for waging war, essentially representing a last gasp of the Enlightenment, except for its alleged Napoleonic imprimatur. Moreover, his doctrines were simple: he proposed that 'there is one great principle underlying all the operations of war – a principle which must be followed in all good combinations' which, in varying tactical and strategic contexts, was reducible to bringing one's mass to bear on the decisive point.¹⁶ His works were also replete with easily consumable typologies and lists, of types of war, of principles, of branches of warfare, etc. He was also an inveterate self-publicist who had a knack for finding highly placed positions

¹⁴Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2001), 69–96.

¹⁵See Robert M. Epstein, *Napoleon's Last Victory and the Emergence of Modern War* (Lawrence: UP of Kentucky 1994).

¹⁶Baron de Jomini, *The Art of War*. G.H. Mendell and W.P. Craighill (trans.) (Westport: Greenwood Press 1862), 63.

in or near major headquarters despite being a probably narcissistic and difficult person with whom to work.¹⁷

Despite addressing the same theoretically uncertain environment as Jomini, Clausewitz only gradually succeeded Jomini to the heights of fashionable strategic thought. By the time *On War* was published posthumously, Jomini had already been one of the leading European military thinkers for nearly three decades. Clausewitz was initially read through a substantially Jominian lens.¹⁸ His theory of war was both known in Prussia since its posthumous publication and found some engagement from British military professionals after publication, but it suffered from a relative lack of Anglo-American attention, partly due to the excoriation of Clausewitz by Jomini and his disciples, including Sir Edward B. Hamley (who ensured Jomini's apparent dominance in British military thinking in the latter half of the 19th century). Popular belief holds that the first full length English translation of *On War* in 1873 by Colonel James John Graham occurred as a response to surprising Prussian victories over Austria in 1866 and France in 1870–71; i.e., that unexpected events caused sufficient uncertainty to triggered interest in Clausewitz and prompt a translation. Christopher Bassford has argued that there is no evidence for this perspective, that it was simply coincidence. Sales were also miniscule; the translation did not signal the start of a Clausewitzian fashion. Rather, what popularised Clausewitz in Britain were the journalistic correspondences of Thomas à Court Repington to the *Morning Post* (1902–4) and *The Times* (1904–18) of the Russo-Japanese and First World Wars – despite the favour in which Jomini was held. Repington's writings helped inaugurate a Clausewitzian golden age, partially because as a popular journalist he reached a wide audience with his enthusiasm for Clausewitz, but also undoubtedly because, in conveying Clausewitz journalistically, he repackaged the Prussian in more digestible form. Yet this golden age was limited to Britain and even there it would become embattled after the First World War.¹⁹

Clausewitz would not be known in the United States until the 1943 publication of Edward Mead Earle's *Makers of Modern Strategy*, with its many German authors, who sought to explain both war in general and German traditions of military thinking in particular to a comparatively ill-informed American audience.²⁰ From this point onward, Clausewitz's popularity in the United States was assured by a succession of shocking events

¹⁷Antulio J. Echevarria II, 'Jomini, Modern War, and Strategy: The Triumph of the Essential', in Hal Brands (ed.), *The New Makers of Modern Strategy: From the Ancient World to the Digital Age* (Princeton: UP 2023), 145–68.

¹⁸Hew Strachan, 'The Elusive Meaning and Enduring Relevance of Clausewitz', in Brands (ed.), *The New Makers of Modern Strategy*, 138.

¹⁹Christopher Bassford, *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in and America* (New York: Oxford UP 1994), ch 5–8.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 174.

which induced information-starved environments, into which Clausewitz was brought in one interpretation or another to fill the gap: the Second World War, which was Earle's original context; the advent of the atomic age; the traumatic Vietnam War defeat and the collapse of limited war theory, the context in which Michael Howard and Peter Paret published their very fashionable translation of *On War*. Yet each interpretation represents a different short cycle fashion concerning both Clausewitz and the contemporary understanding of war. Further shocks followed, including the end of the Cold War and the advent of the Global War on Terror, resulting in new short cycle fashions – although in reinterpreting Clausewitz, these did not seek to reshape his work into an answer so much as to present his work as the problem. Yet despite a succession of fashionable challenges to Clausewitz over the decades, his disputed position as the current long cycle fashion leader has not been convincingly challenged. Modern scholars such as Colin Gray have been able still to assert 'With Clausewitz to Eternity', albeit with a certain degree of defensiveness.²¹

Clausewitz has also proven to be an enduring, long cycle fashion beyond the West as well. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Russian military theorist Genrikh Antonovich Leer sought to combine Jominian prescription with Clausewitzian insight while trying to develop a new Russian theory of strategy.²² Yet Clausewitz was really popularized in Russia by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin after the Russian Civil War, itself a hugely disruptive event for Russian thinking of all kinds, including military and strategic. Lenin explicitly endorsed Clausewitz's insights on the relationship between war and politics, although he and subsequent Soviet military theorists added a Marxist spin on the Soviet interpretation of Clausewitz. The centrality of Clausewitz to Russian military thinking endures to this day, although it has in recent years been somewhat challenged by a new school of innovative thinkers who seek to define war by hostile use of non-military means.²³

Notably, shifts in long cycle fashions in strategic thought are not identical to paradigm shifts as seen in the history of science, whose numerous theories have been superseded throughout its long history and are no longer considered scientifically credible.²⁴ The history of strategic thought has rarely experienced such definitiveness. Scholars still reach back as far as antiquity to understand the history of warfare, but no longer is the recourse to the ancients a system in and of itself for understanding war and its conduct. Von Bülow's outright geometrisation of strategy has not been considered

²¹ Colin S. Gray, 'With Clausewitz to Eternity', *Historically Speaking* 7/3 (Jan./Feb. 2006), 35–38.

²² Engin Yüksel, 'The Continuity and Discontinuity of Fundamental Military Concepts in Russian Military Thought Between 1856 and 2010', unpublished PhD dissertation, Leiden Univ., 2023, 47.

²³ See Oscar Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War: Blurring the Lines Between War and Peace* (Washington DC: Georgetown UP 2019).

²⁴ On paradigm shifts see Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1962).

tenable for over two centuries, but some of the basic vocabulary and ways of thinking which Lloyd popularised remains relevant. Despite the ascendance of Clausewitz's theory of war in the 1970s, with the side effect of throwing Jomini into disrepute, Jominian thinking remains prevalent within the military as doctrine. The Enlightenment remains with us in other ways as well; although we no longer try to create systems as mathematical or geometrical as Von Bülow, we still explicitly build systems of understanding. Long-term fashions layer themselves on top of and affect, rather than replace, each other, even before consideration of the procession of strategic thought's short cycle fashions.

Short cycle fashions matter not merely for their incessant churning in and of strategic thought in general, but also because they affect understanding of the long cycle fashions in which they are embedded. Hence, the interactions of long cycle fashions and external events generate short cycle fashions pertaining to the interpretation and understanding of the long cycle. The Clausewitz long cycle fashion in particular has been subject to this dynamic. As Hew Strachan has suggested,

The Clausewitz so readily condemned by commentators of today, such as Martin van Creveld, John Keegan and Mary Kaldor, is the Clausewitz who was fashionable in the 1970s. The fact that the rationality of the 'formula' of war's relationship to policy looks less clear in 2007 does not invalidate it as an interpretative tool. The problem has arisen from its artificial exclusivity, from its being taken so very much out of context. There is much more to *On War* than one hackneyed catchphrase, and the tragedy for the armed forces of the United States and their allies today is that greater attention to rather more of the text would have provided the intellectual underpinnings for greater self-awareness and strategic sensitivity than has been evident over the last half decade. We need not to ditch *On War* but to read more of it, and to read it with greater care.²⁵

Styles, fads, and fashions under, against, or in response to Clausewitz

Although fashionable for over a century, not every understanding of Clausewitz has been equally fashionable. Some fashions, ultimately proven to be short cycle despite the ambitions of their authors, have even sought to dethrone the reigning Clausewitzian long cycle fashion. The intellectual relationships created by short cycle fashions in strategic thought directly engaging with the Clausewitzian long cycle during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries demonstrates the messiness of interaction among intellectual fashions. This cyclicity has a distinct dynamism, as the style and features

²⁵Hew Strachan, 'A Clausewitz for Every Season', *The American Interest* 2/6 (July 2007), <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2007/07/01/a-clausewitz-for-every-season/>.

which made fashionable a particular interpretation of Clausewitz often proved after a disruptive event to be the precise features to make that same interpretation unfashionable.

By 1914, as Hew Strachan has noted, *On War* had come to enjoy its greatest readership and influence since the original posthumous publication in 1832–1834. Reading and studying *On War* was a pan-European activity, with the Germans and the French taking the lead – and drawing their own observations from it – with the British lagging a bit behind. Of particular interest to European militaries were his emphases on the tactics-strategy relationship and the salience of moral forces in war, which each military interpreted and adapted into planning in its own way. Most often this included an emphasis on the primacy of the offensive and the importance of decisive battle. Yet during the First World War, Clausewitz vanished from military and strategic analyses. For some in Britain, it had become politically awkward to refer to any German approvingly, even though Clausewitz was considered to be among the good ones.²⁶

In 1911, Julian Stafford Corbett contributed to the pre-1914 Clausewitzian fashion by developing a theory of maritime strategy with certain precepts predicated upon Clausewitz's theory of war while presenting a theoretical style distinct from that of Jomini-influenced Mahan. These Clausewitzian elements focused primarily on employing his limited/unlimited war and offence/defence distinctions.²⁷ But Corbett committed the sin of attempting to qualify the Royal Navy's attachment to Mahanian theory and its tradition of seeking out battle at every opportunity. Despite teaching at the Royal Naval College and having some influence with the British First Sea Lord John Arbuthnot Fisher, Corbett's theoretical style and content encountered too much social resistance from the Royal Navy to become fashionable – particularly after the battle of Jutland in 1916. Jutland was no Mahanian decisive battle, nor a Trafalgar. Key to the controversy surrounding Corbett's theory was not its Clausewitzian element but its qualification of the importance of battle, which some held to be the cause of the poor performance – relative to expectations – at Jutland. Although he co-authored the subsequent official history of the First World War at sea, the Lords of the Admiralty added a preface explicitly disclaiming his strategic principles.²⁸ Corbett was unlucky. He had sufficient influence to appear to be a threat to understood Royal Navy traditions right at a time when poor performance in a specific battle resulted in a potential low-information environment. The Royal Navy identified Corbett's Clausewitz-framed theory of maritime strategy as part of the

²⁶Hew Strachan, 'Clausewitz and the First World War', *Journal of Military History* 75/2 (Apr. 2011), 369–75.

²⁷See J.J. Widen, 'Sir Julian Corbett and the Theoretical Study of War', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30/1 (Feb. 2007), 109–27.

²⁸Barry M. Gough, 'Maritime Strategy: The Legacies of Mahan and Corbett as Philosophers of Sea Power', *RUSI Journal* 133/4 (Winter 1988), 60.

problem, to be neglected while reaffirming the Mahanian decisive battle orthodoxy. (For example, three generations of *Makers of Modern Strategy* have now substantially ignored Corbett!)

Yet the First World War did more than simply unsettle strategic theories at sea; it did so also on land. In Britain, the combination of controversial conduct of the war with an array of new emergent technologies, including tanks, threw prior military theory into doubt – particularly in the minds of the two leading British military theorists of the interwar era, John Frederick Charles Fuller and Basil Henry Liddell Hart. Both men, but especially Liddell Hart, sought to remedy the identified dearth of good military and strategic theory they had identified in the aftermath of the war; both therefore took aim at Clausewitz. We might suggest that each sought to trigger an informational cascade, which demanded moderation, if not outright replacement, of Clausewitz. In this regard, the British interestingly bucked the European post-war trend to reaffirm Clausewitz.²⁹ A key engine of Fuller's *The Foundations of the Science of War* was direct and sustained engagement with Clausewitz, in which he is often complimentary but with regard to the conduct of war suggests that 'our present-day theory of war is based on Clausewitz, possibly on a misinterpretation of Clausewitz, who, I consider, misunderstood Napoleon'.³⁰ Fuller acknowledged Clausewitz's influence, yet even more specifically, suggested that it could have been a misreading of Clausewitz which became fashionable. Fuller sought only to moderate Clausewitz, rather than repudiate him entirely, as he favoured certain features of Clausewitz's theory, particularly the emphasis on moral forces. His influence was limited, partly because he was always more interested in tanks, partly because he was a difficult and controversial person in the British Army. Fuller very explicitly sought to develop a scientific system of strategy, which, he believed, that neither Clausewitz nor anyone else had achieved up to that point, but it became too esoteric – even occult-ish – to be taken altogether seriously. He himself never became as fashionable as his younger counterpart, Liddell Hart.

Liddell Hart experienced a substantially different First World War than Fuller, one which included being gassed on the first day of the battle of the Somme. Emotionally traumatized, Liddell Hart survived the war with an engrained need to prevent such a war ever from being fought again. Liddell Hart therefore sought to present a new system of strategy and it was he, rather than Fuller, who triggered and sustained an informational cascade in British (and later American) military theory. However, his system of thought was ultimately too intellectually dishonest to survive fully intact the close scrutiny it ultimately received, being especially interested in polemically *using* rather than honestly *exploring* history. A journalist and military

²⁹Strachan, 'Clausewitz and the First World War', 390–391.

³⁰J.F.C. Fuller, *The Foundations of the Science of War* (London: Hutchinson & Co 1926), 109.

correspondent for *The Morning Post* (1924–5), *The Daily Telegraph* (1925–35), and *The Times* (1935–9), he was also a popular military historian, and so was able to reach a wide audience. Hostile to Clausewitz, he called him the ‘mahdi of mass and mutual massacre’ and blamed him and his theories for the carnage of the First World War.³¹ His contemporaries acknowledged the quality of his thought, the popularity of his work, and either apparently accepted, or at least failed to challenge, his hostile interpretation of Clausewitz.³²

Liddell Hart sought substantially to replace Clausewitz with Sun Tzu as the heart of strategic theory, thereby replacing battle with indirect approaches. The indirect approach always formed the pivotal element of his theories, whether tactically, strategically, or politically. Liddell Hart did admittedly mellow as he matured and drew a line between Clausewitz and his disciples, implicitly acknowledging that Clausewitz was not the problem but rather later readers who developed a fashionable but wrong interpretation of Clausewitz. Yet Liddell Hart’s own emotionally charged interpretation was also inaccurate.³³ An inveterate self-publicist and mentor to younger scholars of war, Liddell Hart was able to sustain the indirect approach fashion, at least within the academic study of strategy, through personal contact with many of the upcoming leaders of strategic studies as well as his own personal prestige. Yet by the end of his life, he was beginning to see the influence of his fashionable dislike of Clausewitz unravelling, even though the indirect approach would live on through the popularity of the US Air Force pilot and strategic thinker John Boyd, also within the US Marine Corps, and in the development of the manoeuvre warfare concept.

Yet before this occurred, a new shocking event overtook strategic thought – the invention and use of atomic weapons and the emergence of nuclear strategy. This event was even more destabilising to strategic thinking than any previous shock, including Napoleonic warfare. The sheer awe atomic weapons inspired demanded conceptual and theoretical adaptation; in response to the atomic obliteration of Hiroshima, Labour MP Major Donald Bruce informed the House of Commons that ‘[t]he old diplomacy is completely dead. With the coming of the atomic bomb, we could, if we wished, tear up completely Clausewitz’s classic “On War”’.³⁴ Even a decade into the nuclear age, Bernard Brodie adhered to this basic message: ‘The old concepts of strategy, including those of Douhet and of World War II, have come to

³¹Basil Liddell Hart, *The Ghost of Napoleon* (London: Faber 1933), 120.

³²On quality and popularity, see R.H. Beadon, ‘Some Strategic Theories of Captain Liddell Hart’, *RUSI Journal* 81/524 (1936), 747–8; on Clausewitz in particular, see for example ‘Review of *The Decisive Wars of History: A Study in Strategy*’, *RUSI Journal* 74/496 (1929), 894–5, and ‘Review of *The Ghost of Napoleon*’, *RUSI Journal* 78/512 (1933), 875–6.

³³Bassford, *Clausewitz in English*, 130–5.

³⁴Quoted in R. Gerald Hughes, ‘Carl von Clausewitz and his Philosophy of War: The Evolution of a Reputation, 1831–2021’, *History* 105/368 (Dec. 2020), 791.

a dead end. What we now must initiate is the comprehensive pursuit of the new ideas and procedures necessary to carry us through the next two or three dangerous decades'.³⁵ The information environment for strategic theory was now defined by overwhelming uncertainty.

Founded on this rejection of these old ways of thinking, during this period the academic field of strategic studies was born. This in turn altered the community: no longer did military and ex-military dominate the discussion with some input from individual civilian scholars. Rather, civilians became dominant in strategic writing and theorising. Many emerged from academic fields unacquainted with military strategy or Clausewitz, even though many did have insight into the military from experience of the Second World War. Key figures included Thomas Schelling from economics, Herman Kahn from physics, and Albert Wohlstetter from mathematics. Working broadly together, the first generation of American strategic studies constituted a new informational cascade over the course of two decades from 1945 to 1965 with their theories of nuclear strategy, limited war, and systems analysis. They presented a whole new system and methodology of (occasionally pseudo-) strategic thinking which was adopted, in broad strokes, by other civilian scholars and analysts within both academia and the policy-making world. The professional military was sceptical but found it difficult to resist the resulting cascade meaningfully, particularly when at least some of its constituent ideas received an enthusiastic reception at the highest levels of the Department of Defense. As Brodie recalled in 1971, during Robert McNamara's tenure as Secretary of Defense, 'his "court" was comprised mostly of systems analysts (Enthoven, Wohlstetter, Rowen, *et al*)', at least some of whom had also previously been directly involved in the development of nuclear strategic or limited war theories.³⁶

In the process, these civilians redefined their theoretical inheritance from Clausewitz to suit the new, nuclear weapon-dominated geopolitical context so that they could make sense of the new limited wars the United States was fighting: policy dominated war so that it might tame war's violence, a particularly pressing concern given the looming danger of nuclear escalation which weighed heavily upon civilian theorists and defense analysts.³⁷ Events had led to a different interpretation of Clausewitz becoming fashionable from that which had dominated the interwar understanding resulting from Liddell Hart's crusade against the Prussian; moreover, the relationship was reversed from more or less intransigently critical to appreciative. Liddell Hart disapproved of this development, and other critics of strategic studies sought to tar with a broad brush the nuclear theorists as neo-Clausewitzians

³⁵Bernard Brodie, 'Strategy Hits a Dead End', *Harper's Magazine* CCXI/1265 (1955), 37.

³⁶Bernard Brodie, 'Why Were We So (Strategically) Wrong?' *Foreign Policy* 5 (Winter 1971–1972), 156.

³⁷Strachan, 'The Elusive Meaning and Enduring Relevance of Clausewitz', 123.

even though many of those explicitly targeted hardly invoked Clausewitz at all.³⁸

That Clausewitz remained rather neglected despite his reinterpretation is reflected in the comparatively greater influence of Schelling's distinctly non-Clausewitzian theories. Schelling cited Clausewitz only once in *The Strategy of Conflict* and similarly once, indirectly via Colonel F.M. Maude's introduction to a translation of Clausewitz, in *Arms & Influence*. Schelling took a decisive step away from Clausewitz not merely in taking leading part in the fundamental redefinition of strategy after 1945 but also in a similarly fundamental reinterpretation of war as a bargaining exercise rather than the violent imposition of one's will upon the enemy.³⁹ Some of his disciples in the US Department of Defense attempted to implement this theory of war during the Vietnam War, particularly shaping air operations against North Vietnam. The result was failure and disappointment. The trauma of US defeat in Vietnam contributed to a new environment of theoretical uncertainty in the latter half of the 1970s. Another key contributing factor included the sense that strategic thinking itself had hit a dead end, largely due to the excessive emphasis placed on technology and technical specifications of nuclear weapons in nuclear strategy.⁴⁰ The resulting uncertain environment was ripe for a new informational cascade.

It was not long in coming. By the end of that decade, in fact, multiple cascades had begun, none of which has actually ended to this day. Each of these cascades centered on a new or re-emerging concept. Geopolitics, grand strategy, and strategic culture each sought to return a sense of the bigger picture to the overly technically oriented study of strategy. Each of these three concepts was adopted not merely in strategic studies, but also beyond it in international relations. Grand strategy has become its own, very fashionable and largely flimsy cottage industry in international relations; even those who partake in it do not take it particularly seriously: 'Grand strategies are easy to devise – they are forward-looking, operate in generalities, and make for great book tours. Whenever a foreign policy commentator articulates a new grand strategy, an angel gets its wings'.⁴¹ Strategic culture has been similarly appropriated by international relations, leading to a bifurcation in how to conceptualise and study it between strategic studies and international relations. Alongside such big picture ideas, in response to the failure in Vietnam warfighting became more fashionable again, particularly among the

³⁸See, for example, Anatol Rapoport, 'Introduction', in Carl von Clausewitz (ed.), *On War* (Anatol Rapoport, ed. (Baltimore: Penguin Books 1968)), 11–80.

³⁹See, for example, Thomas Schelling, 'Bargaining, Communication, and Limited War', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 1/1 (Mar. 1957), 19–36.

⁴⁰Lawrence Freedman, 'Has Strategy Reached a Dead-End?' *Futures* 11/2 (Apr. 1979), 122–31.

⁴¹Daniel W. Drezner, 'Does Obama Have a Grand Strategy? Why We Need Doctrines in Uncertain Times', *Foreign Affairs* 90/4 (July/Aug. 2011), 60–61.

military, through the related concepts of operational art and the operational level of war.

Into this same informational vacuum stepped two scholars of both military history in general and Clausewitz in particular, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, with a new translation of Clausewitz's *On War*, published in 1976. It was accessible, particularly to the soldiers who were its primary intended audience. Howard and Paret made multiple choices in translation which not only reflected the nuclear age in which they had matured as historians and strategic analysts but also improved the text's accessibility and popularity: they presented the new, policy-focused understanding of Clausewitz which had emerged during the nuclear age; they invoked the new fashion of operations and operational level; they also offered a state-centric interpretation of Clausewitz. It spoke to an army traumatised by the experience of Vietnam.⁴² Clausewitz – this Clausewitz – became an instant fashion, with both the military and civilians. The Howard and Paret translation of *On War* has been required reading at probably every Western military academy and war college since its original publication. Harry Summers subsequently invoked this interpretation of Clausewitz, and actually leaned even more into the state-centric Clausewitz with his misinterpretation of Clausewitz's wondrous trinity, to explain how the United States and the army had gotten strategy wrong during the Vietnam War.⁴³ This interpretation would inform the Weinberger, later Weinberger-Powell, Doctrine concerning the employment of the US armed forces.⁴⁴

Yet Cold War geopolitical circumstances did not endure. The end of the Cold War created a new information-starved environment characterized by new foci on civil wars and non-state actors, encouraged by bloody events unfolding in Yugoslavia and Rwanda, even as liberal triumphalism reached fever pitch with the popularisation of Francis Fukuyama's end of history thesis. A new, multi-faceted informational cascade resulted, redefining national security much more broadly than it had been understood for decades and even imperilling the continued survival of strategic studies as a discipline as being too old-fashioned in an era of small wars and inevitable liberalism.⁴⁵ Clausewitz became contentious again – more accurately, the then-fashionable interpretation of Clausewitz was mistaken for Clausewitz himself and attacked. Martin van Creveld, who had only five years earlier lauded 'the eternal Clausewitz', proclaimed that we entered a post-Clausewitzian world: 'contemporary "strategic" thought about every one of these problems is fundamentally flawed; and, in addition, is rooted in

⁴²Strachan, 'The Elusive Meaning and Enduring Relevance of Clausewitz', 129–32.

⁴³Harry G. Summers, Jr, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the War* (New York: Dell 1984).

⁴⁴Strachan, 'The Elusive Meaning and Enduring Relevance of Clausewitz', 134.

⁴⁵See, for example, David A. Baldwin, 'Security Studies and the End of the Cold War', *World Politics* 48/1 (Oct. 1995), 117–41.

a “Clausewitzian” world-picture that is either obsolete or wrong’.⁴⁶ Crevelld identified the Clausewitzian world-picture with Summers’ interpretation of Clausewitz, yet even more distorted: states, identifiable armies, loyal populations, and politics – employing an incredibly peculiar definition of politics which associates it exclusively with inter-governmental relations. His perspective quickly triggered a limited informational cascade, prevalent among certain populations: in his autobiography, he relayed with both pride and self-deprecation a story in which the White House itself contacted him to procure a copy of his book and he directed them to the nearest bookstore.⁴⁷ Crevelld’s academic reception was more muted, with reviews which were critical of his tortured depiction of Clausewitz.⁴⁸ Despite the acknowledged inaptness of his new interpretation of Clausewitz, within a decade, Crevelld’s post-Clausewitzian perspective had been adopted and adapted by others, most influentially Mary Kaldor, who saw in the new wars, which she believed characterised the break-up of Yugoslavia and the future of war, a blurring of lines among war, crime, and ethnic cleansing. She too explicitly held Clausewitz to be obsolete.⁴⁹

Others participated in the fashion of Clausewitz bashing by targeting different elements of his theory, most notably the war-policy relationship, also a cornerstone of Clausewitz’s Cold War popularity. The popular military historian John Keegan, for example, asserted with the very first sentence of *A History of Warfare* that ‘[w]ar is not the continuation of policy by other means’.⁵⁰ Although he acknowledges issues of translating into English the German word *politik*, he very quickly and arbitrarily thereafter assumes the same state-centrist interpretation of politics upon which Crevelld and Kaldor rely and which stems from the Howard/Paret translation. Similar criticisms of Clausewitz would be levelled by subsequent analysts, such as Phillip Meilinger, who on the basis of Clausewitz’s allegedly fatally flawed discussion of war and policy characterised him as a religious icon which needed to be busted to make space for some form of purportedly new and better thinking.⁵¹

Inevitably, the fashion of attacking Clausewitz drew his defenders to the field to resist those criticisms they considered to be unfair.⁵² It has also

⁴⁶Martin van Crevelld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press 1991), ix; for the eternal Clausewitz see Martin van Crevelld, ‘The Eternal Clausewitz’, in Michael I. Handel (ed.), *Clausewitz and Modern Strategy* (London: Frank Cass 1986), 35–50.

⁴⁷Martin Van Crevelld, *Clio and Me: An Intellectual Autobiography* (Tampere: Castalia House 2016), 166–7.

⁴⁸See for example Andrew Lambert, ‘Review of *The Transformation of War*’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 15/1 (1992), 128–31; and John Strawson, ‘Review of *The Transformation of War*’, *RUSI Journal* 136/3 (1991), 76–77.

⁴⁹See Mary Kaldor, *New & Old Wars* (Cambridge: Polity 2006).

⁵⁰John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Vintage Books 1994), 3.

⁵¹Phillip S. Meilinger, ‘Busting the Icon: Restoring Balance to the Influence of Clausewitz’, *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 1/1 (Fall 2007), 116–45.

⁵²On the impropriety of the criticisms by Crevelld, Keegan, and Kaldor, see for example Lukas Milevski, ‘The Mirage of Post-Clausewitzianism: Understanding War and Politics on the Frontier of Clausewitzian Thought’, *Military Strategy Special Issue The Continuing Relevance of Clausewitz* (Dec. 2020), 16–20.

resulted in the emergence over decades of a cottage industry of Clausewitz studies not just within strategic studies but even beyond.⁵³ Fashions have not only also gripped this smaller cottage industry and subcommunity but have even tended to mirror the wider fashions pertaining to Clausewitz, whether by contributing to, or seeking to repudiate, those fashions. Exemplary in this regard, respectively, are Peter Paret's *Clausewitz and the State*, which helped popularize the state-emphasis in understanding Clausewitz by putting the state at the centre of the study, and Edward Villacres' and Christopher Bassford's 'Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity', which sought to push back against that state-centrism.⁵⁴ Since the 1990s, the focus of Clausewitz studies has gradually shifted from directly defending Clausewitz to moving beyond the Howard/Paret interpretation and so broadening the Clausewitz scholarship. This latter shift itself is multi-faceted, including exploring specific elements such as Clausewitz's wondrous trinity more deeply, emphasising his engagement with insurgencies, and beginning to translate the vast quantity of historical accounts of military campaigns which he also wrote.⁵⁵

Conclusion

And so we reach the present day, in which the Clausewitz long cycle fashion in strategic studies remains substantially unshaken. In international relations his work is less relevant; for example, the unClausewitzian bargaining model of war, so strongly discredited in strategic studies after the Vietnam War, remains dominant. Yet the very identification of Clausewitz as a 'fashion' suggests that there will come a time when his work is no longer fashionable. There have already been times when this appeared to be plausibly historically the case, such as during Liddell Hart's long period of influence. But the recurring fashion of criticising Clausewitz, from Liddell Hart to Kaldor and beyond, merely reaffirms the Clausewitz long cycle fashion's endurance as they feel compelled always to engage with and repudiate him—(on the principle that even bad publicity is still publicity, although in this case also because even his critics do not doubt his position in the field). Moreover, each attempt at repudiation draws in defenders, further reinforcing his dominance of the fundamentals in strategic studies.

⁵³For an example of studying Clausewitz beyond strategic studies, see Martin Kornberger and Anders Engberg-Pedersen, 'Reading Clausewitz, Reimagining the Practice of Strategy', *Strategic Organization* 19/2 (May 2021), 338–50.

⁵⁴Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1976); and Edward J. Villacres and Christopher Bassford, 'Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity', *Parameters* 25/3 (Autumn 1995), 9–19.

⁵⁵For example, respectively: Thomas Waldman, *War, Clausewitz, and the Trinity* (Farnham: Ashgate 2013); Sibylle Scheipers, *On Small War: Carl von Clausewitz and People's War* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2018); and Carl von Clausewitz, *Napoleon's 1796 Italian Campaign* Nicholas Murray and Christopher Pringle, trans. (Lawrence: UP of Kansas 2018).

The Clausewitz long cycle fashion will not end through targeted criticism and repudiation, but through substantial neglect and the rise of a new system of knowledge concerning strategy and war. This, too, nearly occurred in the nuclear age, but ultimately the system of strategy with which the first generation of academic strategists sought to replace the old ways of thinking, including Clausewitz, proved inapt for waging war in and after the Cold War. The Clausewitz long cycle fashion was more resilient than the system which was intended to supplant him, thanks in part to the constant cycling of relevant short fashions. Yet even this hypothetical neglect which would be the true end of the Clausewitz fashion will not be his death knell; rather, his work will simply find a specialised place within a different overall system of strategic thinking much as did the earlier long cycle fashions, from Machiavelli's recourse to the ancients, which remains a fashionable subgenre of popular and academic history, to Jominian thought, which transformed into military doctrine.

Third, it is clear that in strategic thought, fashions interact in messy and non-linear ways. This is true both between the dominant long cycle and multiple short cycle fashions, as well as among the short cycle fashions themselves. Thus, contrary to Sproles and Abrahamson and Piazza, some short cycle fashions emerged directly to repudiate Clausewitz. That they remained short cycles in the end demonstrates merely that they failed to do so. Moreover, one and the same features of a popular Clausewitzian interpretation might be fashionable during one short cycle fashion, then fashionable to criticise in the next, such as Clausewitz's alleged focus on the state. The features did not change but their apparent meaning and relevance was altered by changes in the geopolitical context.

Ultimately, as the Clausewitzian theory of war demonstrates, the history of long cycle fashions in strategic thought demonstrates that truly resilient systemic codifications of strategy are rare and far-between, even as endemic short cycle fashions may have systemic effects on our collective strategic thinking.

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Notes on contributor

Lukas Milevski is a (tenured) assistant professor at Leiden University, where he teaches strategic studies in the BA International Studies and MA International Relations programmes. He has published widely on strategy, including two books with Oxford University Press: *The Evolution of Modern Grand Strategic Thought* (2016) and *The West's East: Contemporary Baltic Defense in Strategic Perspective* (2018).

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