

‘Shadows of Uncertainty’: Clausewitz’s Timeless Analysis of Chance in War

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Think, too, of the great part that is played by the unpredictable in war: think of it now, before you are actually committed to war. The longer a war lasts, the more things tend to depend on accidents. Neither you nor we can see them: we have to abide their outcome in the dark.

Thucydides

Humans like to feel in control of their environment, to be the masters of their fate, and may feel uncomfortable when things have to be left to chance, the course of events cannot be reliably predicted or, as Machiavelli suggested, fortune appears as a fiendish Goddess wanting to be ‘mistress of all human affairs’. Such thinking can lead to dangerous misunderstanding, strategic myopia and even historical myth. For such reasons, Clausewitz’s analysis remains important today: it forces us to confront reality and to emphasise the demands chance and uncertainty places on human action, will and creativity.

The ‘Shadows of Uncertainty’

Clausewitz remarked that ‘war is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser intensity’.⁸² So, how are we to distinguish this concept from that of chance? Certainly these concepts are related in the sense that a psychological state of uncertainty is often a consequence of the play of chance. Yet, as Herbig notes, ‘one may feel uncertain for many reasons other than chance, and chance does not always lead to uncertainty’.

The concept of uncertainty essentially refers to the human reaction to that which cannot be fully known or controlled and concerns the subjective psychological condition of those involved in war. As such, uncertainty becomes evident as integral to the nature of war as soon as we consider the human forces that are central to it. To ensure theory does not lose touch with reality, Clausewitz stresses that it ‘must also take the human factor into account ... The art of war deals with living and moral forces. Consequently, it cannot attain the absolute, or certainty; it must always leave a margin for uncertainty. War is not only about factors that can be counted or calculated but is suffused with psychological factors which are inseparable from physical factors: unlike an alloy, they cannot be separated by chemical processes.

All decisions in war must be taken with regard to consequences in this moral realm; whether this relates to one's own forces, government, and wider society, or those of the enemy and neutral actors. As Clausewitz states, it would be platitudinous to list all such phenomena because most are commonly known. A few examples indicate the types of issues concerned: the enemy's intentions and strength of will, public opinion, morale, and so on. It is because these factors are inherently intangible and unpredictable – 'they cannot be classified or counted' – that attaining certainty as to their precise character or ultimate effect is necessarily limited regardless of the quantity or quality of information one might have. Clausewitz explains how similar actions against different people, or even against the same people at a different time, can produce entirely different effects. Furthermore, he notes how, for the commander, 'Thousands of wrong turns running in all directions tempt his perceptions; and if the range, confusion and complexity of the issues are not enough to overwhelm him the dangers and responsibilities are.'

Chance and uncertainty should not be conceived as being everywhere, all of the time – there are observable linear cause-and-effect relationships in war. However, uncertainty is central to the nature of the phenomenon, along with the measures humans employ to overcome it. Modern developments, such as those associated with high-tech systems or professional institutional intelligence agencies have not rendered these insights obsolete. If anything, these ideas may be even more relevant to modern warfare which takes place in multiple dimensions, often among civilian populations, employs a mind-boggling mix of old and new technologies, and is pervaded by endlessly complex political, legal, and ethical dynamics, refracted through the omnipresent 24-hour mass media, and involves multiple actors, diverse groups, and complex bureaucracies.

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