Clausewitz and Strategy in the Missile Age: A Critique of Bernard Brodie's Strategic Thought

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Clausewitz and Strategy in the Missile Age: A Critique of Bernard Brodie's Strategic Thought

In the normal course of things it is modern commentators that critique their predecessors. In the following pages I will turn this idea on its head by critically reviewing the strategic thought of Bernard Brodie (1910-1978) using the strategic thought of Carl von Clausewitz (1710-1831) as the basis for my critique. Specifically, I propose to compare their thought using four major criteria as a framework. These criteria include: what is war; why employ military power; when, or under what conditions should military power be employed; and how should military power be used.

To put this effort in proper perspective it is necessary first to say a few words about the lives and times of these two military thinkers. Clausewitz lived his life over a hundred years before the advent of nuclear weapons. He was a professional military officer for most of his life. He knew war at first hand. Brodie, by contrast, was an academic. He never wore a uniform nor did he know from direct personal experience about the horrors of war. He was, however, associated throughout his life with military institutions. He was, in fact, a member of the faculty that opened the National War College in 1946. It would appear that these two men separated in time, place and

personal experience do not have very much in common. They do, however, have several very significant intellectual bonds. First, they were students of military history. Second, and most importantly, they lived and wrote in times of extraordinarily revolutionary change in terms of the nature of warfare. Clausewitz sought to come to grips with the totality of Napoleonic war, while Brodie brooded over the impact of nuclear weapons.

The thesis of Brodie's article, extracted from his larger work War and Politics, is summarized as follows. Nuclear weapons are weapons of sublime irony. They are so destructive that their use negates their value. Their real value, then, lies in their deterrent properties, to make the cost of war too high for potential enemies to contemplate, i.e., utility in non-use. As a result direct wars between the great powers have become an increasingly remote possibility. The thrust of Brodie's argument would appear to have a decidedly un-Clausewitzian bent. A closer examination of this may prove that first impressions can be misleading.

Turning to the first criterion for comparison, what is war, I find a high degree of similarity in the thinking of both Clausewitz and Brodie. To Clausewitz war is a political act, "... the continuation of policy by other means." Brodie clearly thinks likewise. He notes that the really important questions concerning the use of nuclear weapons are political in nature:

" We should notice...that all of them are in part, though in varying degree, political questions...they cannot be answered adequately without reference to...political considerations and data." He believes that war is a rational act of nation-states and the application of force must be preceded by political objectives. Brodie and Clausewitz both believe, as a result, that the military must be subordinate to the policymaker. Brodie criticizes military leaders for being too occupied with the means of nuclear war ---- the technology of such weapons ---- vice the ends of such weapons. He argues that the awful potential destructiveness of such weapons should not overshadow the political reality of their existence. These are sentiments that Clausewitz would find appealing.

On the question of why employ military power, Clausewitz posits that war is "...to compel our enemy to do our will" and, more importantly, to achieve political goals. Brodie, I believe, has no argument with these views as far as they go. He takes this argument a step further by asserting there are circumstances in which the threat of unleashing overwhelming power is sufficient to positively affect the behavior of potential enemies without resorting to an actual engagement of military forces. As Clausewitz might have put it in his own words, "Possible combats are on account of their results to be looked upon as real ones."

It is with the third criterion, under what circumstances should military power be employed, that I see Brodie making his

greatest use of Clausewitzian logic to strengthen his view on the deterrent nature of nuclear weapons. Both Clausewitz and Brodie see war as serious business; not to be initiated for frivolous objects. Clausewitz argues eloquently that to be successful in war there must be some proportionality between ends and means. "Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in magnitude and also in duration." Brodie seizes upon this Clausewitzian thought and uses it as a point of departure for his own thought on strategy in the "missile age". Brodie argues that the essence of nuclear deterrence lies in the fact that their are no rational scenarios - in which a nation's policymakers would possibly believe that the risks inherent in a nuclear exchange would not far outweigh any conceivable gains. In the case of nuclear war ends and means can never be proportionate. In making this point Brodie even makes a direct reference to Clausewitz. He also does another very Clausewitzian thing to strengthen his argument, i.e., he draws upon historical record to demonstrate that political leaders in both the Kremlin and Washington view the nuclear risk-gain benefit ratio in the same light he does. Clausewitz would have difficulty arguing against the soundness of his own logic in Brodie's case.

The fourth criterion for comparison, how should military power be employed, is a more problematic one than the other

criteria. For Clausewitz the engagement of forces in war is not to be avoided, but actively sought under the most positive conditions for the attacking forces. In war, Clausewitz fervently believed, bloodshed cannot be avoided. Brodie, of course, using Clausewitz's own logic has demonstrated why nuclear forces should never be engaged. There are no effective ways to actively use nuclear weapons in a military conflict. Brodie is not saying here that nuclear war is impossible, quite the contrary ---- it is the "lurking fear" that deterrence may fail that draws the nuclear powers back from the abyss. On a conventional level, however, I assume that Brodie sees eye to eye with Clausewitz. Although it should be noted that Brodie does not specifically address this issue in his article. He does comment on the fact that nuclear weapons have acted as a constraint on the use of conventional forces. In regard to nuclear weapons, I believe that Clausewitz would see the strength and rationality of Brodie's position.

The evidence, I think, is compelling: Brodie is a disciple of Clausewitz. Although Brodie arrives at some conclusions that seem at first glance highly non-Clausewitzian ---- the purpose of the military in the nuclear age is to avert war ---- he arrives at them through use of Clausewitzian logic. On each of the major criteria used for comparison they hold similar views. They both adhere to what noted psychologist and mathematician Anatol Rapaport calls the "political philosophy" of war. Perhaps this

is not as strange as it seems. A wider reading of Brodie's writing, for example his seminal work entitled Strategy in the Missile Age, makes it clear that he studied Clausewitz in great detail. He admires Clausewitz (this is clear from the glosses contained in the Paret translation of On War) and focuses on two particular aspects of the Prussian's thought: 1) policy must control the direction of military operations; and 2) means and ends in war must have some congruence. These two concepts lie at the heart of Brodie's arguments about the nature and utility of nuclear weapons. More importantly, Brodie's application of Clausewitz to nuclear war underscores the continuing relevance of Clausewitz's thought for contemporary military thinkers. The old, dead Prussian offers no prescriptions, but he did capture some universal aspects of war and bequeathed them to his intellectual descendants of whom Bernard Brodie is a very prominent example.