



## A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CLAUSEWITZ AND LIDDELL HART'S MILITARY THEORIES AND THEIR APPLICABILITY IN MODERN WARFARE: INSIGHTS FROM SRI LANKA AND UKRAINE

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*The celebrated idea of Prussian war strategist Carl von Clausewitz regarding conventional warfare played a dominant role up to the First World War in the West. In his seminal work "On War", Clausewitz posits: "If you want to overcome your enemy, you must match your efforts against the power of resistance!" In a way, his idea was akin to annihilating the enemy's army in major battles. However, this idea was challenged by British military strategist Basil Henry Liddell Hart in his book, titled "The Strategy", by proposing a different military theory called "Indirect Approach". The objective of this paper is based on making a comparative analysis between Clausewitz and Liddell Hart regarding the utility of their military theories in modern warfare. While taking a methodology based on a comparative analysis of the utility of the two doctrines, this paper explores the effectiveness of those military strategies against the current asymmetries in modern warfare. To buttress the reliability of this research, the examples from the Ukrainian war and the Sri Lankan civil war between 1990 and 2009 will be examined. The main objectivity of this paper lies in creating a novel discussion on the merits and demerits of Clausewitz and Basil Liddell Hart's theories of war in contemporary warfare. The results emerging from this research will demonstrate the relevance of re-reading both Clausewitz and Liddell Hart in an era where the orthodox idea of warfare is at stake.*

Keywords: strategy; military; war; Sri Lanka; Ukraine;



## INTRODUCTION

The dominant refrain of the present age is that we are in the "post-Cold War era". Beyond that, we are not sure. We may be living amidst the triumph of liberal capitalist democracy and the end of history, a period of civilisational conflict, or – as the current worldwide turbulence would encourage us to conclude – the age of terrorism or AI. Whatever we choose to believe, we tend to think of the Cold War as a unique event, now the memory of a bygone age. However, the catastrophic events that took place last year with Russia's invasion of Ukraine suddenly ended the slumber of those who dwelled on the romanticising vision of liberalism and Cold War nostalgia. Russian invasion of Ukraine did sabotage Fukuyama's thesis along with Huntington, who assumed that a military conflict between Russia and Ukraine is an impossibility under their shared Orthodox values. (Huntington, 1989). Given such a turbulent time, the importance of tracing military strategies comes to the fore. It is in this context that this paper intends to make a comparative analysis of the strategic moves of two great military thinkers of human history. It is by no means an exaggeration to state that the military doctrines propounded by Clausewitz and Liddell Hart are antithetical as their philosophical approaches to the battlefield took different bents. Thus, any attempt to compare both of them in light of modern warfare can become a complexity. Yet, this study intends to take a nuanced approach in revising Clausewitz and Liddell Hart.

The celebrated idea of conventional warfare of Clausewitz arose when European powers engaged in complex geopolitical encounters in search of hegemony. It should be understood under the thread of European history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Wherein, Basil Liddell Hart emerged as a champion of a different military theory called the "Indirect Approach" in an era where conventional warfare failed

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to achieve the objectivity of war. The military failures that Liddell Hart witnessed as a captain of the Yorkshire light infantry regiment on the Western front or in the battle of Somme compelled him to look for an alternative military theory to intensify favourable military outcomes. It appears to be evident that both military strategists have moulded their theories parallel to the historical incidents, which contained an empirical basis.

Based on a comparative analysis of both Clausewitz and Basil Liddell Hart, this paper explores the validity of their theories of modern warfare. The certainty of challenges encompassing modern warfare ranging from military asymmetries to the development of AI are obvious issues that may refute the theories of Clausewitz and Liddell Hart, but the task of this paper remains twofold. First, it examines the differences between two military doctrines separately while astutely analysing their applicability in the modern battlefield. In doing this task, this study looks into the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009), which was by all means an unconventional war within a state and Russia-Ukraine military conflict. Secondly, this paper will assess how both military doctrines can become effective regardless of their orthodoxy in 21st-century warfare.

### ANALYSIS FROM "ON WAR"

Carl von Clausewitz stands in a prominent position in the small pantheon of Western military theorists as his magnum opus "Vom Kriege" stands as a monumental work containing remarkable ideas, which are even useful for modern warfare in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Prussian military theorist Clausewitz completed his celebrated thesis under the contemporary needs of the European giants. In fact, Clausewitz' own state Prussia was squeezed in between the Austro-Hungarian empire and France by creating a hostile environment for Prussian existence, which fervently impacted Clausewitz's understanding of war as the continuity of politics by the other means. Nonetheless, today Clausewitz is often quoted than read, more venerated than understood. (Shephard, 1991).



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First-time readers of Clausewitz certainly find his style obtuse and confusing as it fills with more philosophical aphorisms than providing a more astute analysis of a military theory. For instance, in the opening chapter of "On War", Clausewitz describes war as nothing but a duel on a larger scale, an act of force to compel the enemy to do our will or else he reiterates his most popular dictum "War is a continuation of politics by other means". (Kennedy, 1988). Despite the aphorism filled with his text that tries to describe war as a dialect, one needs to understand Clausewitz as a military thinker rather than a soldier. The objective of writing his thesis "On War" was rooted in capturing the observation that is universal to all wars regardless of the geopolitical locations. After having studied the Napoleonic wars in his time, in which he served as a general, he uses a dialectical method of reasoning in exploring the nature of war. This usage of the dialectical method of critical examination by using a dialogue of contrary views seemed to have risen from the 19th-century German philosophical tradition, which frequently dealt with the dialect. (Mc Neil, 1982).

In his explanation of war, Clausewitz describes war as a social phenomenon that is aimed at imposing one's will on one's opponent using force. Based on his state-centric interpretation, written in an era where European powers were interested in consolidating the state power, Clausewitz acknowledged the fact that war can embody different ends depending on the actors, purpose and even means available at the time. He further understands man's inherent thirst for war as a part of human existence which can only be resolved through bloodshed. In continuing his lengthy analysis of war, Clausewitz describes war as a riddle, which constitutes no logical limit to its application of force. Each side will compel its opponents to follow suit: A reciprocal action that must lead, in theory to extremes. (Clausewitz, 1976).

The paradoxical Trinity is the phase initiated by Clausewitz in describing the three main pillars of the war: *the government, the army and the people*. The first factor to be constrained is the government. As Clausewitz emphasises the central role politics plays in war, he posits that war is not an end unto itself, but rather a tool in realizing



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the political objectives. Although he was a trained military general, Clausewitz was not a military exclusivist to rely only on military solutions as he regarded war as the last resort. The second pillar in his trinity is the people and Clausewitz believed that people should be zealous in war efforts for its successful needs. He states that *“passions that are to blaze up in war must already be inherent in the people as war is not an action of living force upon a lifeless mass but always the collision of two living forces”*. (Ib., p. 18). He understood the risk that awaits the people in war and duly explained the only way to reduce the human casualties on the war front was based on mutual coordination among the states, that distinguished civilized forms of warfare from savages. The third and final factor that Clausewitz highlighted was the army and he states that *“the political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation of their purpose”* (Ib., p. 25). All in all, Clausewitz’s paradoxical trinity comprised of the tendencies of the government, people and armies, in which the effects and contrasts among them produce outcomes which are difficult to predict.

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It should be borne in mind that the geopolitical trajectories that encompassed Clausewitz’s military upbringing decisively shaped his military philosophy in favour of major battles. He was truly fascinated with the Napoleonic way of overthrowing the enemy-to render him politically helpless and militarily impotent, thus forcing him to sign whatever the conditions that Napoleon determined. Also, Clausewitz

was an admirer of the subtle military techniques used by Fredrick the Great of Prussia. Fredrick the Great often looked for an alternative objective in occupying the territories that would enable them to annex them or use them in a fair deal. These two characters more or less inspired Clausewitz in constructing his strategic approach on the battlefield based on the launching of massive attacks. (Langston, 1963). He proposed that the goal of any solid army was to annihilate the enemy. He states: *“We must pursue this goal with the greatest energy and with the last ounce of our strength”* (Ib., p. 56).

His faith in major battles in warfare can be further seen in his analysis of the strategic principles for the offence which illustrates his stances in the offensive lines of war. He states: *“We must select for our attacks one point of the enemy’s position and attack it with great superiority”*. Clausewitz was more conventional in using the infantry forces on the battlefield with greater confidence, which may have derived from his admiration of the French legion. Regarding the consistency of the use of force, he states: *“Even though we are strong, we should still direct our main attack against one point only. In that way, we shall gain more strength at this point. For to surround an army is possible only in rare cases and requires tremendous physical or moral superiority”*. (Ib., p. 67).

Notwithstanding the grandeur held by Clausewitz in the field of military theory, his strategies reached the ebb in the Great War under their operational failures at the ground level. Amidst the Franco-Russian alliance, Germany opted for Clausewitz’s admonition of attaining a quick victory against the foe, which was carried under General Moltke who desired to capture the French capital. In fact, this was a detrimental move made by the Germans as their intensity on the battlefield finally exhausted them by paving the path to complete military annihilation. (Liddell Hart, 1939). Although Clausewitz had seen greater European wars in his lifetime, he was not aware of what awaited him in the following century. The First World War made unprecedented demands upon the people of the warring nations on both the battlefield and the home front, which were impossible to address by the Clausewitzian approach. (Keegan, 2003).



ROMANIAN  
MILITARY  
THINKING

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## LIDDELL HART'S BIG IDEA

Basil Henry Liddell Hart entered the annals of military history with his most celebrated idea called the *“Indirect Approach”*, but it is important to observe that his military doctrine arose as an answer for the catastrophic military failures of the Great War. In particular, Liddell Hart understood the extensive misreading of Clausewitz and the adherence to large-scale battles caused havoc in the war machinery of both allies and the central forces in the First World War. Liddell Hart witnessed the brutality of major war failures on the Western Front by deploying more soldiers that led the troops to slaughter. Liddell Hart described this as a result that stemmed from Clausewitz’s emphasis on the great superiority of warfare, who held that *“Only a great battle can produce a major decision”* (Lewin, 1971).

Inspired by Chinese strategist Sun Tzu, Liddell Hart developed a new military theory in the 1920s. He realised how political dimensions, sea power, aircraft crafts and public uprising altered the face of war, which fundamentally distinguished from how Clausewitz viewed warfare. In his seminal work entitled *“Strategy”*, Liddell Hart analyses the war as a concept from the ancient time to the Great War and he juxtaposes himself against Clausewitz in the way he interprets the strategy. In his criticism of Clausewitz, Liddell Hart states that the scientific Prussian thinker looked at war from a parochial perspective, which unnecessarily stressed the importance of engaging the enemy as the only means to achieve a strategic end. On the contrary, Liddell Hart describes strategy as *“The art of disturbing and applying military means to fulfil the ends of policy”* (Liddell Hart, 1967, p. 335).

The indirect approach remains the monumental contribution made by Basil Liddell Hart to the military theory. It appears that Liddell Hart coined this indirect approach after a careful examination of the history, in which he realized that war is won when the means of war are applied in a manner that an opponent is unprepared to meet, that is, employed indirectly. He looked at how Hannibal marched across the Alps to strike Rome as a palpable example from history manifesting

the indirect approach. In his theory of *“Indirect Approach”*, strategy does not need to overcome resistance, but rather exploit the elements of movements and astonish to achieve victory by throwing the enemy off balance before a potential strike. He states: *“Direct attacks against an enemy firmly in position almost never work and should never be attempted”* (Liddell Hart, 1929).

This was a statement that came from him through a set of historical illustrations he presented, where attacks on formidable targets ended in unmitigated military disasters. He uses the word *“Dislocation”* as a keyword of the indirect approach as dislocating the enemy stands more paramount than seeking an instant victory. The subsequent results arising from dislocating the enemy open greater opportunities for military generals to exploit the chances. He discusses the chances that any military leader can accomplish in discussing his second principle of the indirect approach: *“To defeat an enemy, a commander must first upset his enemy’s equilibrium; which is not accomplished by the main attack, but instead be realized before the main attack can succeed”*.

Unlike Clausewitz, who was fascinated with major battles and massive attacks, Liddell Hart never endorsed direct success in war. He explained that a commander should never employ a rigid strategy revolving around powerful direct attacks or fixed defensive positions. The Infantry was his favourite mode of war, which needed to be buttressed by the combined air and artillery forces and it was obvious that this mechanism generated the German military doctrine *“Blitzkrieg”* in the Second World War against British, French and Soviet troops. However, he was mindful of the political apparatus in achieving the military objectives. (Waltz, 1959). Liddell Hart believed if wars are waged to attain political objectives, then those objectives should not be beyond the accessible military means to achieve them. Generally, the task of war is what he calls a better state of peace, or the realization of a policy of goal that makes peaceful existence better for at least one of the combatants. He argues that military victory does not spontaneously ensure attaining the object unless it is aligned with the political object.



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## SHADOWS OF CLAUSEWITZ AND LIDDELL HART IN MODERN WARFARE

21st-century warfare is an enterprise epitomizing the changing dimensions of war blended with the use of modern technology, which is entirely different from the orthodox continental warfare during the time of Clausewitz. Nonetheless, the roots of the very genesis of war that emanates from the human mind remain consistent throughout the ages regardless of the influx of technology. Warlike element is such a timeless concept that Clausewitz elaborated in “*On War*”, which highlights Man’s inherent enthusiasm for fighting driven by 19<sup>th</sup>-century German romanticism over the battlefield. (Aron, 1983). The spirit that Clausewitz revered is visible today as a key factor in setting the trajectories of war and those sentiments can be easily seen in examining some of the modern wars in different contexts.

The Ukraine-Russian armed conflict is an ongoing war, which can be used as an ideal case study in assessing the relevance of Clausewitz’s warlike element at the ground level. After Russia launched the military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the public morale among the Russian people seemed to have divided as some eagerly engaged in the war towards its end and some openly hesitated about whether Moscow could reach a favourable outcome. But, in the case of Ukraine, the people’s zeal in defending Kyiv was high and the armed forces were combined with the volunteers who appeared to defend the capital. Early reports indicate most of the Ukrainian citizens came forward with the most basic weapons from Kalashnikovs to Molotov cocktails for the sake of defending the capital. To be sure, the strong Ukrainian resistance that Russian forces faced from the Ukrainian people stands as a microcosm of the warlike element of Clausewitz in action. While looking at how the warlike element propounded by Clausewitz came into the picture in armed conflict within a state, the Sri Lankan civil war becomes a clearer example. Unlike the conventional interstate wars that Clausewitz went on to discuss, the Sri Lankan example is a war within a state that lasted for 30 years between the government

and a terrorist organization called LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam). Therefore, applying a Western military theorist in analysing the nature of a civil war on an island seems to be an absurd task, but such an assumption is likely to be false as the nature of war remains the same regardless of the geopolitical distinctions. In his paradoxical trinity, Clausewitz’s war is a strange trinity, composed of primordial violence, hatred and enmity; influenced by the play of chance and probability; and rationally subordinated to politics. The primordial violence, hatred and enmity are linked fundamentally to the people; luck and chance, to the armed forces and their commander; and rationality to the government. (Pereira, 2014). In the 4<sup>th</sup> Elam War, the public sentiment which stood in favour of the government war effort was akin to the manifestation of warlike elements by Clausewitz. In fact, the government mechanism intensified people’s participation in the war by various means such as establishing civil security committees across the country, also the media projection depicting the warrior image of a “*Sri Lankan soldier*” affected on developing people’s faith in the victory, which lasted until the complete elimination of LTTE in 2009. (Chandraprema, 2012).

It is by no means an exaggeration to describe Basil Liddell Hart as the most cited and well-received military theorist, whose military tactics have vanquished the conventional open war strategy of Clausewitz. The “*Indirect Approach*” that Liddell Hart coined in “*The Strategy*” becomes the main mode of resistance embraced by Ukrainians in their efforts to defend Kyiv. When the war broke out on 22 February 2022, Russians mounted an armoured and air assault on Kyiv with the benign expectation that Kyiv would easily surrender before the mighty Russian air power along with the artillery. Russian way of initiating massive attacks denotes the typical Clausewitzian manifestation of war, which preferred direct ferocious attacks on the enemy. But Russian war machinery was flabbergasted by the unexpected resistance of Ukraine. Rather than using the massive armed tanks, Ukrainians used handheld missiles such as Javelin to carry out sudden attacks on the Russian supply chain. In August 2022, Ukrainians attacked the Russian airbase



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in Crimea, which was targeted by some Ukrainian fighters who bombed eight aircraft. When the fully-fledged war was taking place on the Ukraine front, the Ukrainian resistance fighters seemed to have taken it to Russia's heart Moscow itself. It has been reported that two Russian generals were killed on the war front while Russian military facilities were often targeted by Ukrainian rockets. Last summer Russia suffered heavy casualties as Ukrainian forces intensified counterattacks based on the "indirect approach" that included the attacks launched on the Russian garrison in Kherson and destroying the major bridges across the Dnieper River, which led to sabotage Russian supply line. Meanwhile, in Moscow, Russia's prime ideologist Alexander Dugin's daughter was assassinated in August, the US suspected that Ukrainians were behind the attack. Last September was a rather catastrophic month for Russians as Ukraine killed nearly 465 soldiers within a week which was followed by another surprise rocket attack on Russian troops on New Year's Eve in Makiivka. Both the attacks manifested Liddell Hart's two principles in the indirect approach, which states direct attacks on firm defensive positions seldom work and should never be attempted and to defeat the enemy one must first disrupt his equilibrium, which must take place before the main attack is commenced (Amarasinghe, 2023).

The utility of the "Indirect Approach" in Sri Lankan military apparatus dates back to the early 90's and it mainly sprang as a result of the massive failures suffered by Sri Lankan armed forces from their conventional combat strategies against the LTTE. Since the outbreak of the Elam war in 1983, the LTTE achieved an extraordinary combating capacity due to various factors and the morale of the Sri Lankan armed forces reached its nadir in the early 90's. By the time General Cecil Waidyaratna became the commander of the Sri Lankan Army in 1991, the array of military defeats of the Sri Lankan army before LTTE was catastrophic, which included LTTE's capture of Mankulam, retreat from Jaffna fort and daily attacks on military vehicles. In his unpublished autobiography, Waidyaratna describes the sorry state of the Sri Lankan army as one of the military documents praises the saving Elephant Pass military complex under the command of Brigadier Wimalaratne as the greatest military victory earned by the Sri Lankan army.

Even though General Waidyaratna was not a field officer or a great combatant, he was a genuine military theorist. In a work titled "Gota's War" veteran journalist C.A. Chandraprema states: "Waidyaratna was the first army officer, who began to think of a comprehensive mechanism to annihilate LTTE terrorism completely through a prism of military theory" (Chandraprema, p. 218).

Based on the previous operational failures of the Sri Lankan army, general Waidyaratna recommended that the Sri Lankan army should launch its operations separately. He acknowledged the inability to combat in both North and Eastern provinces together as the Sri Lankan army did not possess such an advanced power. Hence, he suggested that the army should focus on the Eastern province where the LTTE remained relatively weaker. In his further analysis, the general believed after capturing the weakest province of the enemy, the Sri Lankan army should use its fullest strength to defeat LTTE in the Northern province. This was what exactly Captain Liddle Heart explained as an indirect approach. Also, he suggested taking intensive actions to increase the capacity of the Sri Lankan navy to combat the supply network of the LTTE.

None of those recommendations were implemented during his tenure and General Waidyaratna passed away in 2001 as a retired general, but surprisingly the operational style adopted by the Sri Lankan army under then-General Sarath Fonseka resembled what Waidyaratna recommended. Between 2007 and 2009, Sri Lankan armed forces relied on the indirect approach rather than the direct approach. The capture of Toppigala and the subsequent military success in the Eastern province paved the path for the Sri Lankan army to consolidate their whole energy in liberating the whole Northern province in 2009.

## CONCLUSIONS

Both Clausewitz and Liddell Heart were products of their time. The historical antecedents, the events they witnessed, political ideologies they revered simply carved the military philosophies that both of them produced. None of those theories in war are



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highly unlikely to be the most appropriate ones in an era, where the asymmetries of wars have come to the fore. Even the Ukrainian war efforts harboured by the indirect approach would be challenged by the growing massiveness of Russian attacks. The celebrated wisdom of Liddell Hart has clearly saved the Ukrainian military resistance from a complete collapse. But the bitter reality that looms before the war front is that sooner or later Ukraine will need to face significant battles for decisive results. In particular, the recent shift in Russian war strategy in Ukraine has embraced a more rigorous path consisting of unleashing heavy attacks by a new wave of missile strikes. The overarching analysis arising from this comparative analysis of both Clausewitz and Liddell Hart based on their utility in modern warfare proves the impossibility of adopting a single military strategy. Therefore, the future of the war is likely to be blended between Clausewitz and Liddell Hart by opting for a middle path.

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