

WHY DO COUNTRIES GO TO WAR? Brig Gen CE Msola

The recent Russian invasion of Ukraine has reminded us yet again that the international conflicts are not over. This calls for countries to continue preparing for war especially when peace is seen to be prevailing because always when tranquility exist tendency for most of us forget the possibility of escalation of war and those instigating conflict always use this opportunity of lack of preparedness to launch the all-out invasion. What is not very clear to some of us is why countries fight each other? It has been argued that a nation will go to war if the benefits of war are deemed to outweigh the disadvantages, and if there is a sense that there is no other mutually agreeable solution.¹ More specifically, some have argued that wars are fought primarily for economic, religious, and political reasons.

It is said that reasons for going to war can be of two main causes, first, if there is a need to render your adversary politically and militarily impotent so that he can sue for peace and second, to occupy his territory in order to annex it.² For the case of Russia-Ukraine conflict the second reason apply better than the first. It is to be remembered that the current conflict started in 2014 following the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity, and initially focused on the status of Crimea and parts of the Donbas, internationally recognized as part of Ukraine. It is also to be recalled that the very same Crimea witnessed a conflict involving Britain, France, Ottoman Empire and Russia between 1853 and 1856.

The Crimean War was the result of Russian demands to exercise protection over the Orthodox subjects of the Ottoman sultan. Another cause was a dispute between Russia and France over the privileges of the Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches in Palestine³. The aim of Russia in the current conflict may be different from the first war fought almost at the same place, this time President Putin in his declaration of war speech set out objectives of what he terms as special operation that he is demilitarizing and denazifying Ukraine. From the look of things President Putin is questioning the existence of the border with Ukraine taking into account the presence of Russian speaking population in the areas of Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk and is taking it as justification for Russia to carry out the operations.

So what one may question is why war? Clausewitz defines war as nothing but a duel on a larger scale is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.⁴ If this is the aim of waging war have we as countries thought the differences that exist amongst us which can take us to the full scale armed conflict? Security and strategic experts have to always be concerned and have this in mind otherwise countries may be surprised by being forced to go to war unprepared which will result into defeat by our potential adversaries. It is to this fact therefore that, it is important to have plans in place for every threat the country perceives, a robust response to each of these based on the capabilities available is of utmost important otherwise our armed forces should have contingencies to respond to these perceived threats should a need arise.

¹<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/war>, accessed 25 April 2022.

²Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret(Oxford University Press Inc., New York, 1976),p. 38

³www.britannica.com/event/Crimean-War, accessed 25 April 2022.

⁴Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 44.

What again is not clear to some of us is why America has commands to include the newly established Africa Command whose headquarters is not even in African soil, these commands have the responsibility of forecasting the potential areas of future conflicts to the US and try to come up with likely response by American armed forces and usually each potential conflicts have several ways of possible response. To do this the US has subdivided the world into zones and assigned a command to continuously assess the possible areas of conflict with her interests in those zones which are Southern Command, Africa Command, Central Command, Northern Command, Indo-Pacific Command and Alaskan Command. Since the task of preparing these contingencies is itself a labor intensive, there is a need to have the custodian of these plans who can be an institution dealing with war plans where they will be kept for possible future use should a need arise on the similar problem and which should be updated from time to time to remain relevant.

Another very important aspect is for scholars of security and strategy to be able to differentiate the terminologies such as war, battle, campaign and normal military operations. For the actions to be qualified as war it must have been sanctioned and declared, that means it has to have political ramification that is what Clausewitz defines as continuation of politics by other means. In some countries today in order to take forces to war the government in office has to send a motion to the parliament giving reasons why should the country be involved in the conflict or others are limiting the power of the commander in chief the case in point is the United States where the President is allowed to send troops to the war front not exceeding ninety days without necessarily having the consent of the Congress. This is an important aspect today in what is termed as the civilian control of the military otherwise if the control is not in place there is likely to be the misuse of the armed forces especially by dictators which can have serious consequences to the country in terms life loss and economy.

Civilian control of the military is a doctrine in military and political science that places ultimate responsibility for a country's strategic decision-making in the hands of the civilian political leadership, rather than professional military officers, civilian control of the military refers to the principle that the military is ultimately subordinate to civilian authority. This formal governance structure for the military has always been necessary, but not sufficient, to ensuring civilian control of the military. As noted by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill professor Richard H. Kohn, 'civilian control is not a fact but a process.'⁵The establishment of a civilian head of state, head of government or other government figures as the military's commander-in-chief within the chain of command is one legal construct for the propagation of civilian control.

Although the decision to commit forces should be done legally by the body which is vested with these powers, it is to be correctly advised after the technocrats are satisfied with the cost-benefit of the operation in question. Importantly, though, this strategic appraisal should be conducted prior to committing forces, which will assist senior policy and decisionmakers better articulate strategic objectives, which should align with the nation's interests. Without this clear guidance (ends), the strategic concepts (ways) and resources (means) can become disconnected, as they too often have. Additionally, while no one can predict the outcome of a given conflict, a

⁵Richard H. Kohn, "An Essay on Civilian Control of the Military". American Diplomacy. (1997).

better understanding may influence leaders against committing military forces if a victorious outcome does not appear favorable or the costs of achieving the objective outweigh the benefits.

Understanding the nature of operational environment prior to committing forces is not a new concept. Some of the greatest military thinkers throughout history have written about its importance. Carl Von Clausewitz, for example, stated, ‘No one starts a war—or, rather, no one in his senses ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it.’ This passage clearly speaks to the importance of aligning ends (‘what he intends to achieve’), ways (‘how he intends to conduct it’), and means (the instruments of national power).⁶ Without a clear understanding of the nature of operational environment, strategic leaders limit their ability to know what they wish to achieve, with what instruments they wish to achieve it, and without doubt, how they intend to do so.

Contemporary strategic thinkers and elected leaders continuously reference the concepts of Chinese philosopher, Sun Tzu. One of the philosopher’s many axioms explains that the victorious warrior wins before committing forces, while the defeated warrior commits forces and then seeks victory.⁷ This notion alone sums up the premise of the need to understand the nature of the environment. Once a leader commits forces, it is often too late to form an effective strategy. Formulating strategy must come before committing forces and the most effective way to form a coherent strategy is to fully understand the nature of operational environment. That is not to say a leader cannot adjust strategy once forces are committed, but even when a strategic course change is needed, a clearer understanding will allow for a greater ability to adjust.

There are useful analytical tools that reside in both classic theory and joint doctrine, but strategic thinkers and policy makers must continuously seek out better ways to examine and understand the strategic environment. Indeed, one would think that on this basis, strategic leaders would demand a better understanding prior to committing forces. Recent history does not reflect such a demand. Vietnam, Korea, and Libya are all conflicts in which the United States failed to achieve its political objectives, or the outcomes were ambiguous. Iraq and Afghanistan are equally of the same, only history will determine whether they are viewed as successful. What is not an issue are the strategic miscalculations of how long these conflicts would last and the costs associated with them. Strategic leadership could have mitigated these miscalculations by having a better understanding of the nature of the environment and this could assist in determining the exit strategy which is also important to be established.

When a decision has been taken to go to war the condition should be laid down which will indicate that time to exit has been reached known specifically as *exit strategy*. Clausewitz clearly puts this in perspective in his book *On War*, ‘Theory, therefore, demands that at the outset of a war its character and scope should be determined on the basis of the political probabilities. The closer these political probabilities drive war toward the absolute [Total War], the more the belligerent states are involved and drawn in to its vortex, the clearer appear the connections between its separate actions, and the more imperative the need not to take the first step without considering the last.’⁸ Originally manifested in the business world, ‘exit strategy’ proponents attempt to apply rigid scientific models of cost-benefit analysis to the all too human

⁶Strategic Intelligence and the Decision to Go to War - Modern War Institute (usma.edu), accessed 10 May 2022.

⁷Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans, Samuel B. Griffith, (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 19.

⁸Clausewitz *On War* p. 5841.

iterative process of foreign diplomacy and domestic politics. The differences being that in business, or personal matters, once a predetermined threshold is reached one can always move on to some new endeavor.

Generally, the best way to avoid war has been to prepare for it not otherwise, therefore maintaining a strong and formidable force is and will be the only recourse to avert war mongers, the opposite will attract them. The questions here are: Can we prevent war? If so, how? Can we make our world a safer place to live in? Fortunately, social psychological research provides some answers. One insight is provided by Social Identity Theory (SIT), originally formulated by the psychologist Henri Tajfel and John Turner. They believed that people are naturally inclined to self, categorized into an 'in-group' (us) and an 'out-group' (them). According to SIT, the ingroup seeks to distinguish itself from the outgroup by attributing them with negative qualities.⁹ The theory has been used to account for discrimination and hostility towards different groups. Outgroup members of a different race, culture, and political affiliation is seen as less trustworthy than in-group members.

From the theory cited above it follows that the way to avoid war is to dissuade the potential adversary by show of force and this is possible when the force so applied is seen to deter otherwise the threat may not work to your advantage. Show of force is an important and usually countries do this during celebrations to mark their national days which is meant to showcase the capabilities or a will to act if the country is provoked. Countries do this to show the newly acquired hardware, types of training and the readiness of the personnel in terms of morale. If meticulously done it is one of the best deterrent acts to try to wade off future conflicts.

⁹Henri Tajfel and John Turner, 'The Social Identity Theory of the Intergroup Behaviour' in *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, N. Worchel and W.G. Austin (eds) (Chicago: L. Nelson Hall 1986) pp. 7-24