ever since Carl von Clausewitz’s book On War was released in the first part of the 18th century, the nature of war has been disputed. According to Clausewitz the nature of war is perpetual, while the character of war changes. Since Clausewitz’s theories are almost 200 years old, an examination on the nature of war can be useful. Do Clausewitz’s theories really still apply and how does their nature manifest itself today and in the future?

The nature of war

In examining the nature of war we must start by defining what we mean by “nature of war”. The nature of war is the unchanging essence of moral and physical characteristics that war consists of. On the most basic level, war is a clash between two independent wills. In war the object is to impose one’s will on the enemy, and each side tries to force its will on the other.

Carl von Clausewitz thought that the nature of war was constant, while the character of war changed depending on its social and political context. The character and forms of war are constantly changing, while its logic is timeless. By arguing that the inner essence of war, its nature, was common in all wars, Clausewitz allowed himself to generalize, but at the same time acknowledge the variation in the character and conduct of war, without making his theory self-contradictive. The character of war thus became the practical and unique expression that individual wars assume. The nature of war, according to Clausewitz, consists of two parts. The “triad”, which means that war is a political instrument and the duel, which means that war is subject to change. Clausewitz meant that, as war takes place between two different parties, who by themselves do not control the course of events, dynamics arise in the actions, which makes every war assume different expressions. Or as Clausewitz expressed it: “Each side therefore compels its opponent to follow suit; a reciprocal action that is started” in which the opposite party “...dictates to me as much as
I dictate to him”.¹ This results in the fact that “war is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case”.² Change can therefore be considered a part of the nature of war, and this variability means that the character of every war differs in each case.

Sun Zi also had similar thoughts on change in the characteristics of war when he stated: “as water has no constant form, there are in war no constant conditions”.³ The fact that war is “nothing but a duel on a larger scale”,⁴ between (at least) two independent parties, means that uncertainty is a lasting element of war. Since none of the parties in war can control the situation, none of them can with certainty predict the other’s actions, and thereby uncertainty is a part of the mutual nature of war.

In theory war is simple, but in practice a number of factors make war difficult. Carl von Clausewitz called these factors ”friction”. The factors that Clausewitz included in his concept of friction were:

1. Danger
2. Exertion
3. Uncertainty
4. Chance

Clausewitz described the effects of friction by stating: ”action in war is like movement in a resistant element”.⁵ The effect of friction also affects all human beings involved. In Clausewitz’s concept of friction we can include numerous factors. Fear, danger, exhaustion and uncertainty makes man’s actions hard to predict. Friction can be everything from a broken vehicle to accidents that involve explosives, to the influence of weather and to human hesitance.

The character of war

As we have already seen, Clausewitz separates the nature of war and the character of war, where he means that the character of war is changeable. This gives us an argument that war can be categorized, but is still subject to change. The methods for describing the changing character of wars differ and the most common grounds for categorizing war are:

1. On the basis of the actors of war.
2. On the basis of the intensity of war.
3. On the basis of the methods used in war.

The most common categorization is to separate wars between states from civil war. This classification builds on the assumption that it is possible to separate wars on the basis of the different powers that are at war and how their institutions that wage war are organized and built up.

Another criterion that is used to modu-

---

² Ibid, p 89.
⁴ Op cit, footnote 1, p 75.
⁵ Ibid, p 120.
late the character of war is intensity. The idea is to separate wars on the basis of the intensity in which they are fought. Intensity can be described in terms of numbers killed or according to the classical scale of conflict. At the top of this scale we find high-intensity conflict, which involves both nuclear and conventional weapons in wars between states. The second category is mid-intensity conflict, which involves conventional forces in wars between states. Finally, we find low-intensity conflict, which involves other actors than states and where the main armament consists of small arms.

The problems with these categorizations are that they can have weaknesses. In the case where we use the actors as the basis for our understanding of the character of war, we find that the concept of what constitutes a state is not entirely clear. We can either define the state as an actor or as a phenomenon. Furthermore, the concept can be questioned from the assumption that the state is the evident actor in war. War was waged before the state was born in the peace of Westphalia in 1648. This makes it hard to look at the state as an actor with exclusive monopoly over warfare. Another problem arises when we have a situation where war has both an internal and external dimension.

The intensity perspective with the division from high intensity to low intensity can be disputed when we consider whose perspective we take. For whom is the conflict one of low or high intensity? From the perspective of the soldier, it might not be that important if he is getting shot at in a world war or in a lengthy low-intensity conflict. The experience can be equally frightening in both cases. In the case of counting numbers killed, we run into problems getting the correct information. Both sides in a conflict have their own interest in hiding the actual figures for their own side and exaggerate the numbers for the opponent.

The future

Examining the concepts of “the nature of war” and the “character of war” leaves us with the conclusion that these concepts seem to be covered in existing theories, although these theories all have their individual problems.

What remains are means and methods. Methods in war are often related to central concepts such as “conventional war”, “asymmetric war”, “guerilla war” and “total war”. These conceptions are often used in pairs, which in one end contain the notion of “conventional war”. Conventional stands for something that usually occurs. But if we study the wars over the past twenty-five years, we find that the most common type of conflict has been intrastate armed conflicts. If we consider

---

6 The state as an actor has monopoly on the legitimate use of violence inside a territory. The state as a phenomenon has its basis in a population, a territory, a government with control over the territory and a capacity to interact with other governments.
recent wars, we find that the full scale of the conceptions is covered. From the asymmetrical attack by Al-Quaida on the USA, to the war in Afghanistan with its mix of forces and methods, to the war in Iraq with elements of “conventional war” at the outset and the subsequent transformation to asymmetrical methods and something that maybe can be classified as “guerilla warfare”. The obvious conclusion of this is that future wars can be fought across the whole scale of existing conceptions of war, and military force has to be built up in order to handle this.

In developing forces and concepts for the future, we must consider what has to come first. We have to understand how we plan to fight in the future. Once we understand this we can develop the necessary technology for doing this. In building and training our future forces we have to start with the art of war and develop intelligent, useful doctrines and concepts.

Technology has a large part in the methods and means that are used and can be used in the future, and the character of future wars will be affected by new technology. But the technology has to be a result of intelligent thinking on what capacities we need for fulfilling the goals of our doctrines. Art has to come before science.

Existing theories – are they still valid?

In our basic understanding of what war is and what the nature of war is we can still use Clausewitz’s theories. The greatness of Clausewitz is that he formed theories that, at least considering what we know today, seem to be really independent of time. The nature of war today is therefore the same as it was in the past. Conducting war is still like moving in a resistant element, and fear, danger, exhaustion and uncertainty still exist in war, in the same way as it has done in the past. Clausewitz’s view on the nature of war as a duel that makes war chaotic and unpredictable still applies. The part of Clausewitz’s theory with the trinitarian analysis also still applies. In every war there are leaders (the government in Clausewitz’s theory), there has to be some popular support (the people), and there are commanders with their military forces (the commander and his army).

The character of future wars can cover the whole scale of existing conceptions on war. As a result of this, we have to build and prepare our military forces so that they can handle the whole scale of conflict from conventional war to guerilla warfare and asymmetric warfare.

In addition to recognizing existing theo-

7 A logical conclusion would be that the conception “conventional war” should change as war changes and shows variation in its dominating trends. For a database over past and present conflicts, see: The Uppsala Conflict Database: http://www.pcr.uu.se/database/

8 We have to remember that this is only a part of the trinitarian concept of Clausewitz. In the his concept, the most important part is made up of the forces of emotion, chance, and rationality. Clausewitz used the people, the army, and the government to illustrate where these forces could be found. See: http://www.clausewitz.com/CWZHOME/Trinity/TRININTR.htm#Meaning
ries, the challenge for the future lies in developing new theories and doctrines that can serve our interests in the future. New technology and new ways of using this technology changes our way of fighting a war, but the universality of war and the way war affects people will remain.

Författaren är överstelöjtnant och tjänstgör på Förvarshögskolan.