

The decisive battle, myth or reality?

General Tactical Review - The Battle

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"The general who launches into the war (...) with the certainty that he can and must annihilate the adversary will throw everything into the balance at the first battle in the hope that he will win the whole decision. Carl von Clausewitz

War is an enduring phenomenon in international relations where the clash of political wills is expressed over a wide spectrum of activities. However, its most emblematic form is physical and military, a concrete and paroxysmal expression of force and violence. It is therefore not surprising that, in the history and imagination of nations, battle continues to be a key moment. This concentration of armed violence, this place where wills and means collide, occupies a fundamental place because it has such a profound effect on the life of civilizations.

Indeed, even if there are counterexamples in this area, the fact remains that conflictual relations between peoples and nations have most often ended on the battlefield.

However, as the consequences of this extreme moment are often radial for both men and states, the leaders in charge of the destiny of the city have always sought to master the complexity of the military campaign in order to achieve victory. It is hardly surprising that the search for the conditions for the physical destruction and moral collapse of the adversary has irrigated the work and thinking of the greatest strategists, first and foremost Carl von Clausewitz. In his work "On War", and more particularly in one of his major books entitled "Engagement", von Clausewitz devoted an analysis of the importance of the decisive battle. The latter, by its absolute character and its political effect - since it is supposed to finalize the sequence of war - took, from the moment the book was published, a fundamental dimension in the tactical and strategic thinking of its readers. Sacralized, relativized or criticized, this notion has not been without its influence on the way of understanding and conducting the war.

Even today, it appears that the very idea of "decisive battle" retains all its relevance in the sense that it fits perfectly within the broad spectrum of forms of conflictuality. On closer inspection, beyond the evolution of forms of battle, and subject to a broad reading of Clausewitzian thought, it is easy to see that it has lost none of its tactical relevance.

Unquestionably, this approach to the "decisive battle" should be considered as being open to debate and may seem dated. Indeed, in the first place, there is no doubt that Clausewitz was first and foremost a thinker, albeit a brilliant one, marked by his times, and that the concept struggles to find exact equivalents in today's reality. The clashes between nations that he integrates as references, even if they are not limited to the confrontations of symmetrical armies, are deeply marked by the Frederician and Napoleonic footprints. Now, at this period, it is appropriate to recognize that the tactical manoeuvre thought out and led by these great military leaders reached a form of perfection in the links between battle, campaign and war. Clausewitz, a witness and actor of this period, came to formalize the idea that at the end of a campaign, whether long or short, the direct or indirect reaching of the enemy's centre of gravity, a highly political moment, ended in a high-intensity battle. In essence, the German strategist wrote in "On the War"² that "the destruction of enemy forces is the overriding principle of war and, in positive action, the most direct path to the goal. It is fundamentally within the framework of engagement that this destruction of forces takes place. It takes great commitment to achieve great success". Starting from the premise that war is based on three objects: military forces in their human and material dimensions, territory and the will of the adversary, it seems that the military forces are the most important factor in the success of a war. There is little doubt that at that time, in the majority of cases, the destruction of armed forces, whatever their forms and modes of action, was a prerequisite for the other two objects. Today, however, the direct attack on the adversary's will, by military or economic means, is a preferred approach for imposing his will without going through the clash of armies. This is illustrated, for example, by the effects of the use of nuclear weapons against Japan in 1945, which was only the paroxysmal continuation of the Allied air strike campaign against Japan and the United States. The NATO-led operation in Kosovo in 1999 did not target armies, but populations or high-visibility or emblematic targets.

Secondly, the forms of battle have changed significantly since the 19th century, when warfare was entering a phase of transformation, and it is now very difficult to imagine in the future conditions where two armies are facing each other in a limited space: with the industrialization of the phenomenon of conflict, the exponential increase in the number of troops and arsenals, the geographical extension of the areas of confrontation and the lack of a clear definition of the role of the army. The battle has become more consuming in terms of resources and men, longer in duration and spread over entire regions: As an extreme example, the Battle of Verdun lasted from February 21 to December 18, 1916, over an area of 2,500 km² and caused 700,000 killed, wounded and missing.³ From then on, the battle became multiple, fragmented, less locatable and the tactical and operational scales tended to become blurred. The notions of contact zone or front zone are more complex to identify and it becomes difficult sometimes even to distinguish between the belligerents, who are sometimes numerous and whose war aims are not very convergent or even evolving.⁴ The end of crises and wars no longer systematically results in a won or lost commitment, because some actors refuse to sanction weapons by taking refuge in a succession of infra-tactical battles.⁵ We are therefore far from the traditional image of the battle, and even more so from the finalization of the war by a supreme act of war that borders on duel.

Finally, making the "decisive battle" an absolute concept has, in a way, made it inaccessible in two ways. On the one hand, there is a real risk of considering, at the operational level, that the search for an encounter constitutes the "Holy Grail" of tactical action. This would be tantamount to admitting that the battle must be the ultimate moment of the campaign and requires the commitment of all means and all wills, whatever the consequences, with a possible increase in

to the extremes in a deadly head-on collision. Therefore, a quick reading of the concept of annihilation of the adversary⁶As was the case with the German school carried by Moltke the Elder and experimented by Marshal Ludendorff, and the will to sanction conflicts quickly given their human and financial cost, is likely to favour the hyperbolic encounter in battle. The two World Wars have, alas, perfectly illustrated this tactical approach.⁷...seeming to have invalidated the notion of "decisive battle". On the other hand, the irruption of the nuclear fact and its theorization within the framework of a war that has become cold could have made it definitively obsolete: Indeed, no belligerent who possesses atomic weapons would put itself in a position to take the risk of losing its sovereignty following a decisive confrontation: it must therefore be considered that the escalation of conventional tactical shocks could quickly be concluded by the threat of the use of the ultimate weapon. Unless the outbreak of nuclear fire has become the only "decisive battle", an assumption that rests solely on the will to use the ultimate weapon.⁸

The Clausewitzian "decisive battle" struggles to find a perfect application in today's conflictuality. However, before making a final decision on the disappearance of this concept, it undoubtedly deserves a more complete analysis in order to define its sources and expressions and to judge in fine their topicality.

From a strictly practical point of view, it appears that this notion has undoubtedly been perverted by a partial or oriented reading of Clausewitz. Indeed, "the decisive battle" takes place in a double context of "unlimited war", but also of "limited war". And the relationship of two belligerents to the ultimate confrontation always remains at the heart of military confrontations, even if the form of the battle certainly takes on new aspects.

In "unlimited war", political objectives can only be achieved by the total destruction of the enemy, and in particular of its armed forces. Thus, the campaign plan aims, combat after combat, to oblige the adversary to place all of his military forces in a situation of ultimate confrontation, if possible in a position of inferior balance of power, so that this last battle definitively annihilates any capacity to exert violence.⁹ The "decisive battle" here finds all its relevance both militarily and politically. However, it does not in itself cover the Clausewitzian vision of war. Less well known, part of the strategist's work also revolves around the notion of 'limited war': in this case, it is less a question of destroying the enemy than of forcing him to negotiate under less favourable conditions than at the beginning of the war. A succession of battles is likely to change the balance of power, so that only useful violence is used. Thus, if "limited war" is globally the one that prevails in an 18th century sensitive to the European balance of power¹⁰In this context, it finds a new relevance in the strategy of control of the war phenomenon by the two superpowers of the "Cold War", with confrontations limited to peripheral conflicts. "Limited war" and "unlimited war" are thus two sides of the same strategic system, all the more flexible as it adapts, from the very beginning, to the definition of the goals of war. Hans Delbrück, a great specialist in military history and an avid reader of Clausewitz's work, is one of the first analysts to note that, according to political expectations, the warlord will ensure that military force is used at the necessary level of violence, whether it is total or subdued. The "decisive battle" is thus not an end in itself, but a practical modality of the political

objective.

Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that while the "decisive battle" is about creating the decision, i.e. ending the confrontation, it does not necessarily impose itself in the same way on both belligerents. There are three types of relationships to consider:

- both actors seek the battle because they both believe they can win it;
- both actors want to avoid the battle because they think they will lose it and wait for better times;
- the actor who thinks he's the stronger seeks to push his opponent to win. the latter seeks to avoid the battle at all costs.

From the outset, therefore, it appears that the perception of the balance of power of each of the belligerents is fundamental in the search for or avoidance of the "decisive battle". The campaign, a succession of battles and manoeuvres, will therefore aim to adjust the balance of power, that is to say, until one actor has a supremacy that allows a decision to be reached by annihilating the other. (which is tantamount to conducting war in its unlimited political form), or until the conditions for a specific superiority are created in order to bring one of the actors to negotiate (limited war). The "decisive battle" is therefore only a tactical approach to political ends. While the expression of the first two postures proves easy, the case of avoidance is particularly interesting in the sense that it fits perfectly into the mechanisms of guerrilla warfare or insurrection. Indeed, faced with a modern and well-equipped army, the insurgent has no other option, unless he takes the risk of being defeated. If he suffers significant destruction, the insurgent has no other option than to refuse symmetrical combat in order to be part of a war with multiple battles, none of which really sanctions the conduct of operations. Flexible and agile in its configurations, the enemy sets itself the objective, by placing itself at the heart of the populations to which it often belongs, of exhausting its adversary by refusing the "decisive battle". Moreover, each time insurgents attempt the decisive battle without having a clearly favourable balance of power, military failure is obvious - the enemy's aim is to exhaust his adversary by refusing the "decisive battle". Cholet in October 1793, NaSan 1952 in Indochina, the "Battle of the Tet" in 1968 in Vietnam or Daesh in Iraq recently are examples of this. Recourse to terrorism or harassment allows the moral and physical potential of the adversary to be eroded in order to establish a new military and political equation for better negotiation. Eventually, if one of the two parties becomes powerful enough, it can regain the initiative and finally defeat its opponent.¹¹. The transition from the insurgent to the classical form of armies is therefore often a matter of time and circumstance. The topicality of the Clausewitzian reading is thus attested.

Beyond the traditional forms of militarized confrontation, it will nevertheless have to integrate new forms of incipient conflict that are likely to win the decision on the battlefield. The "decisive battle" would then be of a broader order than that of armed violence and destruction. Historically, it has not been uncommon for political or economic pressures to radically transform a victorious military situation: the pressure exerted by the two superpowers on France and Britain in 1956 during the Suez operation. But the idea of the "revolution in military affairs" theorists that technological superiority would kill the idea that the two superpowers were not in a position to take the lead in military affairs is not a

new one. But the idea of the theorists of the 'revolution in military affairs', according to which technological superiority would kill the very idea of a battle thanks to early strikes and the 'quasi-transparency' of the zone of operations offered by radars and drones, shows its limits: Apart from the fact that "fog" and "friction" are non-reducible factors, war among peoples makes the use of technology complex and does not always effectively counter the will of the people. of the combatants, the absence of a formalized command architecture, the versatility of the actors, tactical intelligence and the use of surprise, risk-taking and irrationality. Moreover, technological mastery is not the prerogative of only one side: for example, today, given the dependence of Western armies on digital technologies, the cyber domain is becoming a major battlefield issue. In concrete terms, who can imagine a maneuvering division today without its computers and simulation tools? A computer virus integrated by the enemy, however weak militarily, could probably, more surely than an artillery strike, immobilise a command post and many subordinate units. In spite of the precautions taken to counter this type of threat, whoever destroys a command computer system or jams satellites would not immediately obtain the rapport of force likely to win the "decisive battle"? And what about strikes by swarms of low-cost drones against command posts or logistics bases?

The notion of "decisive battle", if it is understood as the sanction of a campaign in which a succession of attrition battles - physical or moral - follow one another until the ultimate battle is reached, is still relevant. If each actor is still seeking, today, to crush its adversary in order to put an end as definitively as possible to a phenomenon that is always too costly in terms of lives and energy, then it is not a question of a "decisive battle", but rather of a "battle of attrition". While each player is still seeking to crush its adversary in order to put an end as definitively as possible to a phenomenon that is always too costly in terms of lives and equipment, military history, and more broadly the conflictual relations between nations, show how much war is above all a tragic duel in which blows and parries alternate over time. Carl Von Clausewitz's thought, sometimes distorted, sums up perfectly this complexity between unlimited and limited forms which must be considered together in terms of finality and therefore, in fine, of styles of manoeuvre in the face of the enemy. For if the nuclear fact has made the battle less proven in its classical form, war continues to be waged in multiple and constantly changing forms that should continue to be studied, without ideology or conformism, from the point of view of both the tactician and the strategist.

1 Clausewitz, a contemporary of the "small wars" of the Tyrol or Spain, is a good enough historian not to ignore alternative forms of combat.

2 Book IV.

3 The battles of Leningrad and Stalingrad are other illustrations.

4 The conflict currently taking place in Syria in particular bears witness to this.

5 This should lead to a relativization of the notions of victory and defeat at this level.

6 Linked, in this extension which goes beyond the original reading of Clausewitz, to the certainty of the supremacy of the military over politics once the war is underway.

7 An exclusive reading of Clausewitz's thought has sometimes led to justifying excesses in the preparation of forces and the conduct of war, to the point of giving a conceptual basis to the nuclear strategy of massive retaliation.

8 This opens up another debate.

9 "In the light of all these intrinsic characteristics of the strategy, we believe that there is only one result that counts: final victory. When it comes to unlimited warfare, we must never lose sight of the fact that the end crowns the work." Clausewitz.

10 And the cost of maintaining a professional army whose men are difficult to replace in the event of heavy losses.

11 The Chinese civil war between 1934 and 1949 or the battle of Dien Bien Phu are perfect illustrations of this moment of change and of reaching a form of organizational, material and tactical maturity.

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