

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

A CONCEPT AT THE CROSSROADS: RE-THINKING THE CENTER OF GRAVITY

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ABSTRACT

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Since the 1980s, the US military has placed great emphasis on the theories and concepts of Clausewitz. Concomitantly, a tremendous emphasis has been placed in doctrine on the consideration of a center of gravity (COG) as a central element of campaign planning. The doctrinal definitions of the COG are still imperfect, but the concept arguably serves as an effective tool for focusing military effort to win decisively in major operations or campaigns. Although the American military performs brilliantly in decisive operations, the difficulties it has faced in Iraq and Afghanistan suggest that a doctrinal renaissance is in order. This project examines the potential for employing the COG concept beyond the realm of decisive operations. After examining the concept's evolution, present doctrinal manifestation and some previous proposals for future employment, the study reveals that the COG's role in American military thinking is flawed and must be reconsidered entirely. To that end, three options are offered for evolving the COG, with a specific recommendation that it would be most effective if removed from doctrine and considered as an abstract, rather than practical, concept.

A CONCEPT AT THE CROSSROADS

Since the 1980s, the military education system has placed great emphasis on the study of the operational art and the theories and concepts of Clausewitz. Concomitantly, a tremendous emphasis has been placed in doctrine on the consideration of a center of gravity (COG) as a central element of campaign planning. After almost a quarter of a century, there is still lively debate over the nature of the COG: the services and joint community continue to parse words over a precise doctrinal definition; staff colleges devote abundant hours to its study; scholars and pundits debate its origin and optimal application with bizarre frequency. All of these activities speak to the concept's pervasiveness. It is solidly ensconced in military thinking and parlance and this is understandable. The COG serves as a beacon for focusing military effort to achieve decisive results in major operations. The effective application of military power to such ends involves taking into account a tremendously complex array of issues, all of which are unique to any given circumstance. When taken with the requirement for thorough but rapid planning and the proclivity that military professionals have for arguing over priorities, it is easy to see why such a concept fits so well into military culture. Further, given the US Military's prowess at winning decisively over the past fifteen years, few in its ranks would argue that the COG concept has not served it well.

As good as the military is at winning decisive battles, it now finds itself paying the penalty for incomplete thinking. The highly-effective decisive operations that made fugitives of the Taliban and removed Saddam Hussein from power have each evolved into a prolonged struggle to provide stability to transforming societies and legitimacy to new broad-based governments. Decisive operations, the military is re-discovering, do not necessarily win wars. The current strategic landscape and the nature of what has come to be known as "The Long War" suggests that the time is ripe for a renaissance in military thinking. A more holistic approach to war, beyond the realm of major decisive operations, is the current mandate and this begs for a corresponding recalibration of the military mindset. Such change, among other things, necessitates adjustments to doctrine and this brings a discussion of the COG's relevance to the forefront. Can the COG concept be useful beyond the context of decisive operations, should it be applied in that context and, if so, how? These are the central questions of this study.

After briefly examining the concept's evolution, its present doctrinal form, and some suggestions for its future, this paper proposes that the COG's role in American military thinking must be reconsidered entirely. With regard to the latter, the paper briefly discusses three options for evolving the COG concept from its present form. The paragraphs that follow will

specifically offer that the COG can be most effective as an abstract concept for focusing military operations.

Interpretation of an Enduring Metaphor

There is a paradoxical quality to the COG in American military culture. Its existence is an integral part of the military planning processes; yet, an enormous amount of intellectual energy has been expended in attempts to precisely define the concept. The genesis for the COG in US military doctrine is generally attributed to Clausewitz's oft-cited passage from *On War*, "One must keep the dominant characteristics of both belligerents in mind. Out of these a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed."¹ Arguably; however, the efforts to translate Clausewitz's theory into a doctrinal concept has overcomplicated matters, resulting in a concept that is remote from what seems to be an effective and simple Clausewitzian metaphor. Put another way, the military's desire and efforts to put the concept to practical use may have actually limited its potential. Despite these problems (or perhaps because of them) a brief examination of how the concept evolved to its present form—and the ongoing debates about its flaws—must precede any discussion on how best to apply it in the future.

Some of the earliest writings about the COG convey much about the impetus for the concept's place in doctrine. Set against the backdrop of the waning days of the Cold War and the threatening, behemoth formations of the Warsaw Pact, the US military focused on refining doctrine that ensured success for "an operational commander who expects to fight outnumbered and win."² Highly problematic at the time was the lack of cohesive joint doctrine. The services put their own parochial spin on the concept as they attempted to translate it into doctrine. Some of these notorious inconsistencies remain today.

Joint Pub 1-02 maintains the current definition of a COG as "the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act."³ This definition is closely paralleled in Army doctrine, though the Army's version is more closely associated with an enemy's forces. The Army definition also offers that, in theory, "destruction or neutralization of the enemy COG is the most direct path to victory."⁴

The Air Force also accepts the joint definition, but nonetheless offers a much more detailed, service-specific version:

In Air Force terms, a COG is a primary source of moral (i.e., political leadership, social dynamics, cultural values, or religion) or physical (i.e., military, industrial, or economic) strength from which a nation, alliance, or military force in a given

strategic, operational, or tactical context derives its freedom of action, physical strength, or will to fight.⁵

The Marine Corps, like the Air Force, is quick to acknowledge the joint definition, but also has a service-specific point of view to offer. “In short,” Marine doctrine states, “centers of gravity are any important sources of strength.”⁶ Interestingly, Marine Corps doctrine also offers a strong caveat: “We want to attack the source of enemy strength, but we do not want to attack directly into that strength. We obviously stand a better chance of success by concentrating our strength against some relative enemy weakness.”⁷ Thus, the Marine Corps offers the complimentary concept of a critical vulnerability (CV), or “an aiming point for the application of friendly strengths against threat weakness.”⁸

The Navy also acknowledges the existence of CVs, yet sees the manifestation of the COG slightly differently. NDP-1 proclaims that “the COG is something the enemy must have to continue military operations—a source of his strength, but not necessarily strong or a strength in itself.” In contrast to the doctrine of the other services, the Navy adds that there “can only be one center of gravity.”⁹

While incongruities abound as to how the COG manifests itself, all of the services seem to agree that the COG is a source of strength. The confusion has been further minimized in recent years through a lot of thought and dialogue. One effort stands out. No doubt heeding the call to transform the COG from “an alluring Clausewitzian buzzword to a useful element in US strategic planning,”¹⁰ Dr. Joe Strange of the US Marine Corps War College offered an analytical method to operationalize the concept. Accepting the COG as a physical or moral source of strength, Strange proposed a methodology for distinguishing between a COG and the critical factors associated with it. Specifically, Strange’s methodology offers operational planners a means to examine a COG or source of enemy strength, recognize the critical capabilities (CC) it possesses and identify critical requirements (CR) associated with those capabilities. Operational planners can examine CCs and CRs for deficiencies or susceptibility to attack, thereby deriving CVs.¹¹ Strange’s analytical model, offered almost a decade ago, has been generally accepted in the joint community and forms the foundation for COG analysis in current joint doctrine.¹² The joint definition and process for analysis are not yet universal. However, their existence indicates that a consensus on the COG as a source of strength with identifiable factors has unambiguously emerged. The ascendancy of the concept as a tool for focusing the application of force has brought with it a general belief in its implementation as a key to victory.

The gradual success in synchronizing the services ideas toward a universally accepted COG paradigm is laudable, if only because it represents a triumph over parochialism and

bureaucracy. Yet, some might suggest that the American military has taken the COG concept—ostensibly born of Clausewitz's metaphor in *On War*—too literally, or have interpreted it incorrectly. In so doing, one might deduce that Clausewitz's intended meaning has been obscured and that serious deficiencies exist in evolving US doctrine as a result.

A number of academics and other pundits have relentlessly cautioned military professionals about attempting to interpret Clausewitz too literally. In the latest online version of an essay that has enamored many staff college students to the works of Clausewitz, Dr. Christopher Bassford of the National War College points out the problematic and somewhat inconsistent manifestations of the COG term in *On War*. Acknowledging that Clausewitz periodically applied the term to specific examples, Bassford offers that Clausewitz also “often used it in very general terms to mean something like ‘the main thing’ or ‘the key point at issue’.”¹³ The implication is that Clausewitz was not terribly concerned with creating an enduring concept to facilitate decisive operations, but rather with simply advising the military professional to “focus on key considerations, rather than frittering his energy away on peripheral concerns.”¹⁴ When considered in such a broad context, the COG becomes much more situational and, arguably, elusive. “To seek for an all-purpose strategic prescription in Clausewitz's discussion of the center of gravity,” Bassford cautions, “will therefore lead to the usual frustration.”¹⁵ Relevance of issue might better describe a Clausewitzian COG under Bassford's line of reasoning. If true, the American doctrinal definitions of the COG as a source of strength may not be in consonance with Clausewitz's original metaphor. The source of an adversary's strength, in other words, may not equate to what is contextually most relevant.

One who has been more overtly critical of the doctrinal COG in a number of published articles is Dr. Antulio Echevarria: a widely respected historian and Clausewitzian scholar from the Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute. Echevarria contends that in its attempts to understand and apply Clausewitz's idea, the American military drifted away from it. Specifically, Echevarria puts forward that the US military's classification of the COG as an adversary's strength or capability is flawed. The source of this misinterpretation, he suggests, may be traced to imperfections in the Paret translation of *On War*: a version that is highly prolific amongst military professionals. Offering a first hand translation and appreciation of his own, Echevarria proposes that Clausewitz's analogy to the physical sciences with respect to his COG metaphor was a very close one. In such a context, the COG concept speaks to the interdependence or unity of the various parts of an adversary. The COG, in this case, “exerts a certain centripetal force that tends to hold an entire system or structure together; thus, a blow at the COG would throw an enemy off balance or even cause the entire system (or structure) to

collapse.”¹⁶ Therefore, under Echevarria’s interpretation, the COG is an operative concept exclusively for action against a cohesive adversary in a war to defeat that enemy completely. Echevarria makes a compelling argument that attempting to put Clausewitz’s COG concept, as he has interpreted it, to use in limited wars or against decentralized opponents would be ineffective.¹⁷

Taken together with incongruities in service definitions and the ongoing debate in the joint community, the contrasts in opinion amongst scholars demonstrate a fundamental point: despite the zeal the US military has for making the COG a central element of operational planning, as a practical doctrinal concept it remains incomplete and contentious. Much of the controversy continues to stem from differing opinions drawn out from Clausewitz’s metaphor. While the authors of American doctrine owe no allegiance to Clausewitz per se, the desire to maintain doctrine consistent with his teachings is understandable. Yet such an approach must be bound by reason. To those who have followed it, the debate over the correctness of the doctrinal COG has been at once amusing, annoying and confusing. Commentators that invidiously guard their interpretations of the COG as Clausewitz’s “true intent” can be distracting to military planners, who must transform ideas and concepts into realities. Unfortunately, this debate is unlikely to change anytime soon.

What has changed—and what will no doubt add fuel to the debate—is the context of the argument. From its origins in the Cold War, the COG concept matured in the American mindset largely during an era when the US military focused heavily (and almost exclusively) on producing doctrine that would win battles decisively. There are many reasons attributed to the ascendancy of such doctrine—an infatuation with precision technology, a desire for rapid conflict termination and a cultural disdain for stability or peacekeeping operations are but a few. Given such a context, it is easy to see how the COG came to be regarded as a capabilities-based source of strength. However, for the current generation of military professionals, the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have evoked an epiphany: battlefield victory is but a small part of war and often will not be an end in itself. The ongoing military efforts in these countries finds the US military engaged in prolonged insurgencies and postwar reconstruction operations far removed from decisive battle. Furthermore, the strategic landscape suggests that the future for the US military will be rife with other such “ambiguous and uncomfortable wars—and their aftermath.”¹⁸ This has evoked a corresponding renaissance in American doctrinal thinking and with it, not surprisingly, a number of proposals to redefine the COG. The impetus for such offerings is the argument that the current military planning processes—to include COG determination—do not adequately consider the complex components of conflict

beyond conventional battle. The result, one might argue, is a lack of analytical rigor in campaign planning that prevents success. In the words of John Gentry:

Decision makers may assess certain of the pieces of the situation correctly but fail to place them in complete context or to anticipate the dynamic effects of an “occupation” force....Even the format of operations plans—designed for combat operations—inhibits sophisticated analysis. For example, it pushes staff planners to cram local and international institutions into template-driven categories like “friendly forces” and “enemy forces.”¹⁹

Current doctrine and thinking, in other words, is oriented almost exclusively toward conventional battles and inadequately addresses the hazy, undesirable missions necessary to win wars. The ongoing difficulties in stabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan, one might argue, sharply illustrate the point.

The perceived shortcomings with current doctrine have not been lost on American military professionals who have begun to critically introspect and direct creative intellect toward changing existing doctrine to make it more relevant. Arguably, the increased ambiguity manifest in the new strategic environment, together with the fact that operations are becoming increasingly multi-lateral as well as multi-agency, makes the enduring need to focus effort even more prevalent. The notion that the doctrinal definition of the COG should be adapted in some way, therefore, is beginning to attract advocates.

Yet, modifying the COG “from a familiar military theory to an ambiguous and uncomfortable political-economic-psychological-security paradigm”²⁰ may not be the right thing to do. Despite its painful evolution and arguable disconnection from Clausewitz’s metaphor, the COG’s stature as a capabilities-based source of strength has become widely accepted amongst military planners. Additionally, the current doctrinal paradigm is considered relatively effective from a practical standpoint. An effort to transform the COG into a doctrinal “catch-all” concept would arguably distance it further from its Clausewitzian roots and potentially nullify its practical value. Whatever modifications are made must therefore be carefully considered.

Evolutionary Signposts

The prolonged and often difficult counterinsurgency and reconstruction efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan have been the inspiration for a great deal of doctrinal thought and a number of ideas for the future of the COG have come to the fore. There are, thus far, two fundamental approaches to these proposals. The first, a complimentary approach, seeks to more fully consider the civil dimension of conflict. This will, among other things, facilitate the transition from decisive actions to stability and support operations. A second approach, not necessarily

exclusive from the first, offers that a coherent military campaign supplements the destruction of an enemy COG (the present paradigm) with the construction of a more benign COG.

A proposal for complimenting the present COG paradigm with a civil-military counterpart was presented by Major Richard Sele in his 2004 *Military Review* article, "Engaging Civil Centers of Gravity and Vulnerabilities." Arguing that "traditional doctrine must evolve to reflect the new environment of conflict," Sele offers that "the civil dimension is now a primary factor in stability operations and support operations as well as offensive and defensive operations." His specific appeal was for a better definition of a Civil COG. Mentioned on numerous occasions in Army Field Manual 3-05.401 (*Civil Affairs Tactics, Techniques and Procedures*), but conspicuously absent in any doctrine dictionary, the Civil COG appears to be a separate and distinct entity from the current concept (referred to as the "Tactical COG" by both Sele and the Field Manual). The Civil COG might be defined as "that broad set of non-military components in the AO that is the priority of effort for the mission and has a direct effect on mission success."²¹ Sele offers military planners eleven possible factors to consider in deriving a Civil COG, but suggests that demographics, natural resources and the environment, and governance will typically be paramount.

On one level, Sele's concept appears to represent the status quo. If demographic, political or environmental factors are sources of an adversary's strength, one might argue, the Civil COG might be indistinguishable from its tactical counterpart. However, what sets the Civil COG apart from the current doctrinal concept is its recognition that the factors that ultimately define success or failure in a campaign may have little to do with an adversary. More specifically, the Civil COG is defined by the nature of a conflict, while its tactical counterpart focuses on the strengths and capabilities of an adversary's military forces. That the notion of a Civil COG is being introduced in doctrine is certainly significant. Clearly, it is an intriguing idea that is gaining momentum.

Another approach was articulated by Colonel Bryan Watson in his Army War College research project "Creating New Centers of Gravity: A New Model for Campaign Planning." Watson accepts the effectiveness of the current decisive COG paradigm but argues that US strategy now requires more than decisive operations aimed at defeating adversaries. "Today, campaign planning," he argues, "must extend in time and space to include orchestrating those actions that foster the emergence of a new viable state from the fires of armed conflict."²² "Military campaign planning," therefore, "must integrate the destruction of the enemy COG and the reconstruction of a less adversarial COG into a single coherent plan."²³

In his approach, Watson offers an analytical planning model for reconstruction wherein “Critical Gaps” are addressed and “Critical Strengths” are preserved in the postwar society of a former adversary in order to construct a more benign COG. It is no accident that the model mirrors the current CC-CR-CV construct—it is designed to supplement it. In theory, planners would consider both models in their prewar campaign design, thereby allowing them to “mitigate the adverse 2nd and 3rd order effects of destroying critical vulnerabilities during combat operations.” The adversary’s COG, in other words, would be attacked carefully and methodically as its destruction, while useful in defeating military forces, may bring undesirable consequences in rebuilding that same society. To that end, enemy COG destruction would be considered a shaping action for the construction of the new COG.²⁴

Introspect

The concepts offered by Sele and Watson have some merits and, with time to mature, could no doubt do much to stimulate thinking during a planning process. Given the weighty influence of the present conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq on doctrine, similar concepts are no doubt being thought out as well. But creative as these concepts are, they are knowledge-based and implementing them in the hazy environment that characterizes stability and postwar reconstruction operations will pose some challenges. Even in their most benign form, these operations are extremely situational, complicated and have historically been marred by significant knowledge gaps and numerous unanticipated challenges. Imperfections are likely and disappointments are inevitable.

For these reasons, the impetus for such concepts is in some ways more intriguing than their utility. There is something revealing about the widespread desire to extrapolate the COG from its present doctrinal form. The foundation for this desire may be a military culture that continues—perhaps unconsciously—to be enamored of decisive operations as a portal to rapid strategic success. In his seminal book *The American Way of War*, Russ Weigley argues that minus the resource-constrained days of the early Republic, American war strategy has been almost exclusively based on the complete overthrow of an enemy via the destruction of his armed forces.²⁵ Indeed, American society generally considers the Civil War and World War II—both annihilationist wars—as its greatest military achievements. This, taken with the fact that several generations of officers have had decisive battle at the core of their training; a fascination with the COG is not surprising. Little wonder that an extension or variation of the current COG concept is becoming the centerpiece of proposed future doctrine for stability and security operations.

Yet, concomitant to the forward-looking efforts by some to adapt the COG to the future challenges has been the recognition by others that enthrallment with the concept in its present form is probably unwarranted. Current doctrine, the argument goes, “creates the unreasonable expectations, if not confusion, where [the] COG is viewed as the ultimate target which, when neutralized by friendly coalition force operations...leads directly to mission accomplishment.”²⁶ Indeed, even a cursory examination of doctrinal definitions and planning processes suggests that destruction of the COG is a penultimate objective. Furthermore, the warfighting concepts that have emerged over the last twenty years seem to embrace the supposition that neutralization or destruction of the COG is not only a sure way to mission accomplishment, it can be done quickly. This thinking is flawed. History shows, if applied thoughtfully, that neutralization or destruction of a COG through the current doctrinal approach can be a chimera.

Consider the aforementioned cases of the Civil War and World War II. The Southern COG is widely perceived to have been the Confederate will to resist, manifested by the continued existence of the Army of Northern Virginia. Logic dictates that surrender of Lee’s Army (a CC) equated to the neutralization of the Confederate COG. History’s outcome seems to reinforce this notion. However, had Lee acted on his purportedly considered option to disband the army and continue resistance through guerilla warfare, this conclusion is not as tidy. Likewise, had the Allied fears of Nazi partisan resistance materialized in the Spring of 1945 despite Hitler’s death and the demise of the Wehrmacht, the present regard for the capabilities based COG might be quite different.²⁷ Ultimately, however, is that both wars ended in the same way as virtually all human conflict does—through a conscious decision to cease resistance when continued struggle was judged too costly.²⁸

Historical example makes a great venue for concept validation. Indeed, each of the aforementioned conflicts is often used to underscore the validity of the COG concept in its present form. What’s often forgotten, however, is that the active commitment of military forces in both cases extended well past the surrender ceremonies. Furthermore, the post-war difficulties these forces dealt with were far from simple. “The displaced populations in post-war Europe,” as an example, “in conjunction with shortages of food, lack of suitable housing, ethnic and racial tensions, and scarcity of domestic police forces created significant public safety and physical security concerns.”²⁹ In annihilationist wars, tactical or operational success must be consummated by other efforts to attain a favorable strategic outcome.

The United States’ ongoing experience in Iraq and Afghanistan exemplifies the notion that active conflict can outlast the neutralization of a perceived COG. Neither the demise of the Taliban, nor the removal of the Hussein Regime brought an end to violence in either theater. In

each case, the US military finds itself engaged with elements of the former regimes as well as a multitude of other groups with varying interests and motivations. At minimum, the nature of the COG has changed in each case. Both theory and doctrine offer that a COG may change in a given conflict. However, it is unclear that staff processes—even iterative ones—are agile enough to apply the concept in a meaningful way under the present circumstances. What's more, the disparate nature of enemies the US faces in each theater arguably makes the concept irrelevant. "The COG concept does not apply," Echevarria thoughtfully concluded, "if enemy elements are not connected sufficiently."³⁰

The Crossroads

Given that the doctrinal manifestation of the COG concept seems ill-suited to the present conflict and has flaws within the realm of decisive operations, what is the best way, if any, to carry the concept forward toward a more holistic doctrine for war? The US military can follow three possible paths.

The first option is to end the confusion and academic debate by banishing the term from American military parlance and gradually replace it with a family of concepts to focus military effort across the spectrum of conflict. This idea is not new. A number of academic writers in the early 1990s discussed the merits of dropping the term from the military vocabulary due to the inability to reconcile differences between joint doctrine, service definitions and the essential elements of Clausewitz's metaphor.³¹ As this study has indicated, these incongruities continue today, but have been arguably lessened in their severity. That notwithstanding, the ongoing inter-service debates about the nature of the COG convince doctrine writers to change the joint definition of the concept with a fair degree of frequency. This causes a significant amount of confusion in its own accord. The bewilderment is compounded by the seemingly incessant grousing of pundits who emphasize the differences between a theorist's metaphor and an identically-named practical concept. Dropping the term completely would remove these stigmas, but unless the US military intends to shelve the teachings of Clausewitz (an unlikely and unwise possibility), this option isn't very realistic. In the 1990s, as now, "the current terminology is too deeply ingrained in our military lexicon to replace it without causing even more confusion."³²

A second option is to accept the COG in its current form, follow the lead of practical-minded thinkers like Sele and Watson and create complimentary and supplementary concepts to focus the effort of important military operations outside the realm of decisive battle. This type of approach seems both logical and expedient as it builds on existing doctrinal concepts to

accommodate present and future requirements. Moreover, this would preserve the intellectual energy that has been poured into developing the COG over the past twenty years. The quandary, of course, is that the new doctrine would be built upon an arguably flawed foundation. The concept as it exists today tends to foster the irrational perception that military success equates to victory and that both can be achieved with a well-aimed stroke if the target is selected carefully enough. The complex and lengthy commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan show that this type of thinking is folly.

Clausewitz's theories have an enduring quality and his COG allegory seems to offer much. This is especially true if one accepts that the ever-changing character of war is indivisible from its enduring nature. A third option, then, is to fundamentally change the way the concept spins through the American military profession. The present paradox with the COG—that the military is at once divided over the specifics of its appearance and fascinated by it—perhaps reveals another. In trying to harness Clausewitz's simile for practical purposes, the US military probably limited its usefulness. If true, the US military should not banish the term from parlance nor attempt to maintain its present doctrinal manifestation and somehow extrapolate its virtues. Rather, the COG would offer its greatest utility if efforts to apply it as a practical concept ceased and it was restored to its rightful place as an abstract metaphor.

A specific recommendation, then, is for the US military to regard the COG along the lines described by Bassford's essay. The US military would gain much by abandoning the present narrow definition in favor of teaching the concept as a simple admonishment: remain focused on the key points at issue and apply resources accordingly. This approach would constitute a tremendous cultural shift, but would do much to disencumber military thinkers of the stigmas of a prescriptive concept. Believers that Clausewitz's analogy to the physical sciences was literal may not agree with this approach. However, their concerns could at least be mollified by the knowledge that if the concept is still misunderstood, it is at least no longer being misapplied.

Those who would dismiss such a course of action would do well to consider the relevance of other Clausewitzian concepts in military culture, such as friction, fog, culminating points and uncertainty. None of these expressions have been operationalized, nor do military staffs devote hours of analysis attempting to quantify them during the planning process. Yet, military professionals use these terms constantly and are able to communicate their meaning effectively through a mutual understanding developed through study and experience. The value of such allegory, therefore, is its ability to express the complex aspects of war in an understandable form. This makes it timeless. Much is lost in trying to inculcate parable into formal and formulaic processes. As Douglas Johnson put it, "doctrine should set forth principles and

precious little more. That would allow the Army to adapt those things that endure to ever-changing conditions and the tools available.”³³ The stigmas that have long been associated with the doctrinal COG demonstrate this clearly.

This is not to say that the exceptional work that has developed the present COG paradigm over the past quarter century should be discarded. Specifically, the CC-CR-CV model developed by Dr. Strange should be retained and refined under a differently named concept such as “Critical Strength.” But this capabilities-based model amounts to an insightful, but self-limiting, form of target systems analysis. Though useful in many circumstances, such a paradigm offers the hazard of confusing the vitally important with the readily derived. In that regard, it seems a bit at odds with what Clausewitz was trying to offer.

For years the COG has been an imperfect, controversial, but arguably effective tool for focusing the effort of military operations. The concept’s prominent role in the doctrine of decisive operations has made it central to military thinking. But the context that bore out such doctrine has dramatically changed and, in many important ways, exposed some flawed thinking. The writers of American doctrine and other military professionals will no doubt grapple with these realities and approach war more holistically. As they do so, they will no doubt seek to apply the timeless and steadfast concepts of the past effectively. To rank among these concepts, the COG must again be regarded as an abstract, but important, metaphor. Attempting to maintain it as an operationalized form of doctrine would severely limit the potential for an intriguing concept.

Endnotes

¹ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ Press, 1984), 595-596.

² James J. Schneider and Lawrence L. Izzo, “Clausewitz’s Elusive Center of Gravity,” *Parameters*, September 1987, 57.

³ The Joint Staff, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Publication 1-02, 2007; available from <https://jdeis.js.mil/jdeis/dictionary/def.jsp?word=center+of+gravity>; Internet; accessed 03 February 2007. The current definition marks a very recent change. Previously, the definition read, “those characteristics, capabilities, or sources of power from which a military force derives its freedom of action, physical strength or will to fight.”

⁴ U. S. Department of the Army, *Operations*, Field Manual 3-0 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Army, June 2001) 5-7.

⁵ U.S. Department of the Air Force, *Air Force Doctrine Document 1-2* (Maxwell AFB: U.S. Department of the Air Force, June 2006), 36.

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²² Bryan G. Watson, *Creating New Centers of Gravity: A New Model for Campaign Planning*, Strategy Research Project (Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College, March 2006), 4.

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²⁴ Ibid., 6.

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²⁶ William G. Pierce and Robert C. Coon, "Center of Gravity and Mission Accomplishment: Understanding the Link," (Unpublished Research Paper), 3.

²⁷ James Jay Carafano, "Post-Conflict Operations From Europe to Iraq," lecture, The Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., 21 June 2004; transcript available from www.heritage.org/research/nationalsecurity/hl844.cfm; internet; accessed 15 December 2006.

²⁸ Pierce and Coon make a strong argument that there are several possible outcomes following neutralization or destruction of a presumed COG. These include abdication or death of an adversary leader, negotiated settlement short of surrender, capitulation or no apparent change of intentions.

²⁹ Carafano.

³⁰ Antulio J. Echevarria II, "Clausewitz's Center of Gravity—Its Not What We Thought," *Naval War College Review*, Winter 2003; available from <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/navy/art4-w03.htm>; internet; accessed 30 November 2006.

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