U.S. NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Est. 1884
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

CORBETT, CLAUSEWITZ, AND SUN TZU

Author(s): Michael I. Handel

Source: *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 2000, Vol. 53, No. 4 (Autumn 2000), pp. 106-124

Published by: U.S. Naval War College Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/44638894

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

U.S. Naval War College Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Naval War College Review*

JSTOR

This content downloaded from
212.219.61.210 on Sat, 13 Sep 2025 07:57:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Professor Handel is the Philip A. Crowl Professor of Comparative Strategy and a member of the faculty of the Strategy and Policy Department at the Naval War College. Having earned a Ph.D. at Harvard University, Dr. Handel has been a senior lecturer at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem and a professor of national security at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He is the founder and U.S. editor of the journal Intelligence and National Security. *His publications, as either author or editor, include* Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought *(3d revised and expanded edition, 2000),* Intelligence and Military Operations *(1990),* War, Strategy, and Intelligence *(1989),* Leaders and Intelligence *(1988),* Strategic and Operational Deception in the Second World War *(1987),* Clausewitz and Modern Strategy *(1986),* Weak States in the International System *(1981), and* The Diplomacy of Surprise *(1981).*

© 2000 by Michael I. Handel
Naval War College Review, Autumn 2000, Vol. LIII, No. 4

This content downloaded from
212.219.61.210 on Sat, 13 Sep 2025 07:57:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

CORBETT, CLAUSEWITZ, AND SUN TZU

Michael I. Handel

Even the most creative theories in history were not conceived in a vacuum; one way or another, they owe something to the works of others. To describe this intellectual and intuitive process, historian of science I. B. Cohen has developed a concept called "the transformation of ideas," which reveals how great scientists have used the existing body of knowledge as a basis of or catalyst for their own inspiration.[1] Scientists such as Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin, for example, either synthesized and combined the work of others, while adding their own ideas, or were heuristically stimulated by existing ideas to develop their own original concepts. The same is true of those whose creative and analytical thought processes have "transformed" the intricacies of strategy—in this case, naval strategy—into an innovative theory or body of work. It is well known that Alfred Thayer Mahan, as he himself made clear, was significantly influenced by Baron de Jomini's work and that Sir Julian Corbett was equally influenced by Clausewitz's *On War.*[2]

My argument is that while Mahan integrates and synthesizes Jomini's work with his own, Corbett uses Clausewitz's *On War* as a heuristic point of departure. Mahan, in other words, remains loyal to Jomini's ideas, and by extension, those of the "continental strategists." In contrast, Corbett, although inspired by *On War,* develops ideas different from and sometimes contradictory to those of Clausewitz. The subtle approach adopted by Corbett ironically resembles that of a work he had never read—Sun Tzu's *The Art of War.*[3] In view of the limited space available, I will focus on two of Corbett's most original ideas, which also provide excellent illustrations of the differences between naval and land-based warfare: namely, his positions on "the concentration of force" and "limited war."

This content downloaded from
212.219.61.210 on Sat, 13 Sep 2025 07:57:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Let me first, however, say a few words on what Corbett and Clausewitz do have in common. To begin with, Clausewitz and Corbett share a belief in the primacy of politics in war and in devising an appropriate strategy to protect the national interests. Clearly, Corbett independently understood the importance of the primacy of politics before reading *On War* in 1904, but Clausewitz's ideas did help him to clarify this idea. Corbett also believes in studying and developing the theory of war for educational purposes. His debt to Clausewitz on this score is made clear in his chapter on "The Theoretical Study of War—Its Use and Limitations" (*Some Principles,* pp. 3–11). Herein he adds that such study will establish a "common vehicle of expression and a common plane of thought . . . for the sake of mental solidarity between a chief and his subordinates" (*Some Principles,* pp. 8, 5).

Corbett also agrees with Clausewitz that since even the best theory of war is "not . . . a substitute for judgment and experience," it cannot "systematize" strategy into an exact science (*Some Principles,* p. 10). At best, theory can ascertain what is "normal"—but war, with its reciprocal, uncertain, and complex nature, is dominated by deviations from the norm (*Some Principles,* pp. 8–9). Friction, chance, and luck must never be discounted as well.[4] Corbett therefore resembles Clausewitz in his repeated emphasis on the importance of understanding both the value and inherent limitations of a theory of war.

"Strategical analysis can never give exact results. It aims only at approximations, at groupings which will serve to guide but will always leave much to the judgment" (*Some Principles,* pp. 83–4). With the constantly changing nature of war (more so in Corbett's time, because of the accelerated development of new technologies and weapons at sea), the first question that either man would ask is, What is the nature of this war?[5] Much more could be said about the similarities between the two, but let me now turn to a discussion of their differences.

Corbett's most glaring criticism of Clausewitz, the continental strategists (for instance, Jomini), and most British naval strategists of his time concerns their "big-battle fixation."[6] Most of Corbett's contemporaries were content to accept this crude and highly selective version of Clausewitz's ideas, because it conveniently supported their own beliefs.[7] This was a major component of the Napoleonic style of war, which consisted of a "strenuous and persistent effort—not resting to secure each minor advantage, but pressing the enemy without pause or rest till he is utterly overthrown."[8] (Corbett believes that the origin of what he terms Clausewitz's fetish for the decisive battle could be traced back to Oliver Cromwell [*Some Principles,* pp. 22, 157, 176].) The search for the decisive battle is closely related to Clausewitz's principle of destruction and achievement of victory through the greatest possible concentration of forces at the decisive point. Clausewitz presents the idea thus:

This content downloaded from
212.219.61.210 on Sat, 13 Sep 2025 07:57:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> Combat is the only effective force in war; its aim is to destroy the enemy's forces as a means to a further end. . . . It follows that the destruction of the enemy's forces underlies all military actions; all plans are ultimately based on it, resting on it like an arch on its abutment. . . . The decision by arms is for all major and minor operations in war what cash payment is in commerce. . . . Thus it is evident that destruction of the enemy forces is always the superior, more effective means, with which others cannot compete (*On War,* 1.2, p. 97).

> We do claim that the direct annihilation of the enemy's forces must always be the dominant consideration. We simply want to establish this dominance of the destructive principle (*On War,* 4.3, p. 228).

The maximum concentration of forces was indeed the key to winning the decisive battle and overthrowing the enemy: Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, Jomini, and all of the other continental thinkers would agree that this is the most important principle of war. Clausewitz puts it this way: "As many troops as possible should be brought into the engagement at the decisive point. . . . This is the first principle of strategy" (*On War,* 3.8, p. 195); also, "The best strategy is always *to be very strong*; first in general, and then at the decisive point. . . . There is no higher and simpler law of strategy than that of *keeping one's forces concentrated*" (*On War,* 3.11, p. 204).

Corbett does not believe that the concentration of naval forces at sea is the highest and simplest law of strategy. On the contrary, he observes that the principle of concentration has become "a kind of shibboleth" that has done more harm than good (*Some Principles,* p. 134). The principle of concentration is "a truism—no one would dispute it. As a canon of practical strategy, it is untrue" (*Some Principles,* p. 160).

> The crude maxims as to primary objects which seem to have served well enough in continental warfare have never worked so clearly where the sea enters seriously into a war. In such cases, it will not suffice to say that the primary object of the army is to destroy the enemy's army, or that of the fleet to destroy the enemy's fleet. The delicate interactions of the land and sea factors produce conditions too intricate for such blunt solutions. Even the initial equations they present are too complex to be reduced by the simple application of rough-and-ready maxims (*Some Principles,* p. 16).

In view of his strongly held opinions, it is not surprising that Corbett expends much effort to prove his point. Indeed, his refutation of the principle of concentration at sea produces some of his most creative and original ideas in *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy.* Furthermore, the process of developing these original ideas embroiled Corbett in a vitriolic debate with some of the leading military theorists and naval experts of his time. This most assuredly did nothing to enhance his reputation, since the subtlety of his ideas destined them to be

This content downloaded from
212.219.61.210 on Sat, 13 Sep 2025 07:57:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

misunderstood. For example, Lord Sydenham later accused him of exerting a negative influence on the doctrine, plans, and morale of the British navy, thereby contributing to their failure to achieve decisive results in the battle of Jutland.[9] Many years later, Cyril Falls charged Corbett with "minimizing the importance of combat."[10] Despite a barrage of criticism, Corbett steadfastly refused to change his strategically "blasphemous" conclusions.

Corbett's first argument was that superior concentration at sea cannot necessarily force a major engagement, because it is easier for the enemy's fleet to avoid battle at sea than it is for an army to do so on land. Paradoxically, the greater the concentration achieved by one's own fleet, the more likely the weaker opponent is to avoid battle. Only through dispersing, or rather pretending to disperse, its fleet can the stronger navy lure the enemy into battle: "If we are too superior, or our concentration too well arranged for him to hope for victory, then our concentration has almost always had the effect of forcing him to disperse for sporadic action" (*Some Principles,* p. 138).

It is well known that Alfred Thayer Mahan, as he himself made clear, was significantly influenced by Baron de Jomini's work and that Sir Julian Corbett was equally influenced by Clausewitz's On War.

Paradoxically, therefore, only less concentration (or the appearance thereof) will lead to a major battle.[11] Moreover, concentration at sea is problematic for other reasons as well. The more a navy concentrates, the fewer the sea lanes of communications and the less space it can secure and control. "Concentration, in fact," Corbett notes, "implies a continual conflict between cohesion and reach" (*Some Principles,* p. 132). A corollary of this point is Corbett's argument that complete or full concentration at sea is impossible, because from the very beginning of the conflict, a substantial number of ships must be diverted for protection of such vulnerable interests as overseas trade and other resources. "The more you concentrate your force and efforts to secure the desired decision, the more you will expose your trade to sporadic attack" (*Some Principles,* p. 160; also pp. 128–52, 155–61). Superior concentration thus not only deters the weaker opponent from seeking battle but presents him with an opportunity to attack his enemy's exposed national lines of communication.

Superior concentration of naval forces creates yet another serious problem. The greater the concentration of a fleet, the more difficult it is to conceal its whereabouts and movements. "Once the mass is formed, concealment and flexibility are at an end" (*Some Principles,* pp. 131, 138). Here Corbett is making an additional argument, much like Sun Tzu's, for the need to keep one's own dispositions "shapeless" in order to avoid disclosing one's intentions. Sun Tzu states:

This content downloaded from
212.219.61.210 on Sat, 13 Sep 2025 07:57:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> The ultimate in disposing one's troops is to be without ascertainable shape. Then the most penetrating spies cannot pry in nor can the wise lay plans against you. It is according to the shapes that I lay plans for victory, but the multitude does not comprehend this. Although everyone can see the outward aspects, none understands the way in which I have created victory (*The Art of War,* p. 100).

Corbett also believes that calculated dispersion and "shapelessness" create unexpected combinations and surprises that bring victory. "War has proved to the hilt that victories have not only to be won, but worked for. They must be worked for by bold strategical combinations, which as a rule entail at least apparent dispersal. They can only be achieved by taking risks, and the greatest and most effective of these is division" (*Some Principles,* p. 134). Elsewhere, he further emphasizes the same point:

> The next principle is flexibility. Concentration should be so arranged that any two parts may freely cohere, and that all parts may quickly condense into a mass at any point in the area of concentration. The object of holding back from forming the mass is to deny the enemy knowledge of our actual distribution or its intention at any given moment, and at the same time to ensure that it will be adjusted to meet any dangerous movement that is open to him. Further than this our aim should be not merely to prevent any part being overpowered by a superior force, but to regard every detached squadron as a trap to lure the enemy to destruction. The ideal concentration, in short, is an appearance of weakness that covers a reality of strength (*Some Principles,* p. 152; also p. 206).

Unlike Clausewitz but very much like Sun Tzu, Corbett underscores the relevance of deception in the achievement of concentration at the decisive point. For Corbett, concentration is not simply amassing the largest number of ships, as Mahan or Clausewitz would advocate; instead, it means manipulating the enemy's perceptions so that he will fight on his (Corbett's) terms. Sun Tzu describes it thus: "Those skilled at making the enemy move do so by creating a situation to which he must conform. They entice him with something he is certain to take, and with lures of ostensible profit they wait for him in strength" (*The Art of War,* p. 93).

Consequently, Sun Tzu's approach can be described as negative, in the sense that he considers the division and distraction of the enemy to be more important than maximizing the concentration of his own forces.[12]

At this juncture, some other notable similarities between Corbett and Sun Tzu should be mentioned. Corbett develops his theoretical insights against a broad background; in other words, he is interested in the diplomatic alliance systems and coalitions formed before and during a war, and he is concerned with the economic and financial dimensions of waging war as well as with the technological and material aspects of war, which were of no interest to Clausewitz.

This content downloaded from
212.219.61.210 on Sat, 13 Sep 2025 07:57:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

(Clausewitz wrote *On War* before the industrial revolution, which triggered an ever-accelerating rate of technological changes.)[13] Corbett also agrees with Sun Tzu that the intelligent strategist must fight only on his own preferred terms and exploit his comparative advantage. As Sun Tzu puts it, "Therefore the clever combatant imposes his will on the enemy but does not allow the enemy's will to be imposed on him" (*The Art of War,* p. 42); "And therefore those skilled in war bring the enemy to the field of battle, and are not brought by him" (*The Art of War,* p. 96).

Corbett's preference for a limited war of a particular type in a particular place, and his preference for the strategic (though not operational and tactical) levels are all part of his search for the comparative advantage of Britain—or that of any other nation in similar circumstances. This is a critical part of all strategic planning, which Sun Tzu and Corbett emphasize but Clausewitz seems to ignore. Perhaps the search for a comparative advantage is only valued by the weak, or by naval powers obliged, with limited resources, to protect a vast empire or fight a formidable land power.

Another important approach shared by Corbett and Sun Tzu is their desire to win at the lowest possible cost. Since this entails taking minimum risks for maximum gains, their theories are dominated by the constant search for low-cost victories and force multipliers. The principal lesson Corbett drew from Britain's strategy in the Mediterranean during the War of Spanish Succession was that it revealed "how an intelligent, if limited, appreciation of sea power to a tender diplomatic situation could produce results out of all proportion to its real physical potential."[14] He learned a similar lesson from the British naval war against Napoleon, wherein thirty thousand soldiers at the Downs forced Napoleon to tie down three hundred thousand men from the National Guards to defend the French coast (*Some Principles,* p. 69). Elsewhere, Corbett points out that the effect of British amphibious threats to use small contingent forces to invade the continent or to divert enemy forces to the coast "was always out of all proportion to the intrinsic strength employed or the positive results it could give. . . . Its value lay in its power of containing [a] force greater than its own" (*Some Principles,* p. 67).

Convinced that an economy of force was a dangerously false economy, Clausewitz instead preferred to focus on the *effectiveness* of force—that is, on the outcome, not the cost. "Since in war," he says, "too small an effort can result not just in failure but in positive harm, each side is driven to outdo the other" (*On War,* p. 585). Clausewitz's conception of a true economy of force was not (as Sun Tzu, Corbett, or modern compilations of the principles of war would argue) to win at the lowest possible cost but rather to make use of all available forces *regardless* of the cost (*On War,* p. 213). Corbett and Sun Tzu also share a belief in the indirect

This content downloaded from
212.219.61.210 on Sat, 13 Sep 2025 07:57:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

approach, which relates to the search for comparative advantage, economy of force, surprise and deception, and limited war. (Unfortunately, a detailed comparison of Corbett, the British style of warfare, and Sun Tzu cannot be attempted here.)

Unlike Clausewitz, Jomini, and the other continental strategists, Corbett was not infatuated with the search for the decisive battle or with the need for the strategic offensive. In general, he favored the strategic *defensive,* with an emphasis on the offense at the operational level. As a result, his detractors mistakenly thought that his comments pertaining to the strategic level of war were referring to the lower levels. Corbett's strategy is based on rational, unsentimental calculations, not on vaguely romantic obsessions with the brilliance of Napoleon or Nelson. Again, like Sun Tzu, Corbett was generally opposed to taking unnecessary risks in war, whereas Clausewitz believed that the military genius, led by his intuition, must be defined by his readiness to take significant risks. "Boldness in war . . . has its own prerogatives. It must be granted a certain power over and above successful calculations. . . . In other words, it is a genuinely creative force. . . . A distinguished commander without boldness is unthinkable" (*On War,* pp. 190–2). Corbett certainly values boldness as an essential leadership quality, but he concludes that careful calculations and strategic creativity should govern all actions.

[The search for a comparative advantage] is a critical part of all strategic planning, which Sun Tzu and Corbett emphasize but Clausewitz seems to ignore. Perhaps [it] is only valued by the weak, or by naval powers obliged...to protect a vast empire or fight a formidable land power.

Since the bravado and daring inherent in bold action naturally held greater appeal for most of Corbett's critics, his sagacious observations on the strategic advantages of the defense were interpreted as signs of passivity and poor fighting spirit.[15] Upon closer examination, Corbett's strategic defensive is found to employ such measures as an intense local offensive, the projection of land forces, various types of blockades, and raids on enemy trade routes. Moreover, Corbett recognizes that once the enemy has been sufficiently weakened on sea and on land, the shift to the strategic offensive should not be delayed. Yet the cult of the offensive so dominated the thinking of his contemporaries that the essence of Corbett's outwardly controversial message was not really heard. As a strategist, Corbett is more concerned with the question of how to obtain certain objectives than he is with the form of a particular war.

According to Corbett, naval strategists must accept the fact that war at sea is not usually a zero-sum game, since it is rarely possible to achieve full command of the sea.

This content downloaded from
212.219.61.210 on Sat, 13 Sep 2025 07:57:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> [It is erroneous to assume] that if one belligerent loses the command of the sea it passes at once to the other belligerent. . . . The most common situation in naval war is that neither side has the command; that the normal position is not a commanded sea, but an uncommanded sea. . . . The command is normally in dispute. It is this state of dispute with which naval strategy is most nearly concerned (*Some Principles,* p. 91).

Consequently, Corbett was not unduly concerned about this issue, probably because he was confident that the Royal Navy would gain command of the sea soon enough. This "relaxed" attitude certainly clashes with Clausewitz's concept of war as the aggressive application of force to end disputes as soon as possible. For Clausewitz, clarity is the objective, decisive action the means; the very idea of tolerating an ongoing dispute or a "shared sea" would be repugnant. As one who also sought the clarity of a decisive battle, Mahan shared Clausewitz's impatience with such ambiguity.

Yet is achieving the desired concentration and winning the decisive battle worth the cost? Clausewitz, Jomini, Mahan, and the continental strategists would all reply in the affirmative. Inflicting a decisive defeat allows the victor to "compel [the] enemy to do [the victor's] will." Clausewitz's own view is not, however, simplistic: he knows that even the most decisive victory is only a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for accomplishing the winning state's long-run objectives. "In war," he warns, "the result is never final" (*On War,* p. 80). By this he means that the military gains secured in battle will not last unless political leaders and diplomats offer the vanquished side peace terms that are acceptable in the long run, and also make a concerted effort to establish common interests between the former foes.

The search for a decisive victory does not, however, have the same allure for Corbett. As a naval strategist, he believes that since "men live upon the land and not upon the sea, great issues between nations at war have always been decided—except in the rarest cases—either by what your army can do against your enemy's territory and national life, or else by the fear of what the fleet makes it possible for your army to do" (*Some Principles,* p. 16). In short, a decisive victory at sea is so rare that it is not normally worth the effort. At a time when all other naval strategists agreed that Nelson's victory at Trafalgar had been exemplary, Corbett reasoned that such adulation was undeserved. After all, he points out, the strategic results of the great sea victory had been indecisive as far as the war against Napoleon on the continent had been concerned, and Nelson may have taken too great a tactical risk.

> Trafalgar is ranked as one of the decisive battles of the world, and yet of all the great victories, there is not one which to all appearance was so barren of immediate result. . . . It gave England finally the dominion of the seas, but it left Napoleon dictator of

This content downloaded from
212.219.61.210 on Sat, 13 Sep 2025 07:57:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> the continent. So incomprehensible was its apparent sterility that to fill the void a legend grew up that it saved England from invasion.[16]

Clearly, Corbett was not trying to enhance his popularity as a naval strategist when he wrote these words, however objectively sensible, of national and naval "heresy." For Corbett, then, an "open" or "closed" blockade; the threat of a "fleet in being"; and the naval support of land operations by transporting, supplying, and landing army troops in combined operations were the "bread and butter" of naval operations and the essence of naval strength. As mentioned earlier, his stubborn adherence to this unpopular position in his work as well as in his lectures at the Royal Naval War College, Greenwich, later sparked accusations that his strategic theory underlay the failure of the battle of Jutland. Surely Corbett thought that Jutland was unnecessary, that without a decisive victory it simply confirmed British naval superiority and put the German High Seas Fleet out of the picture for the remainder of the war. However, even a decisive British victory in the battle, as in the case of Trafalgar, was unlikely to have had more than a negligible impact on the land war.

* * * * * * *

Corbett's development of the concept of *limited war* provides us with another good example of his creative contribution to strategic theory in general and naval strategy in particular. The theory of war expounded by Corbett has little in common with its heuristic starting point, namely, Clausewitz's concept of limited war as set forth in *On War.* Corbett's new concept of limited war also enables us to see how the naval perspective could breathe fresh insight into a strategy that had been ignored or misunderstood by the continental strategists.

First, a brief word on Clausewitz's concept of limited war is in place. For most of his intellectual life, Clausewitz was chiefly interested in the study of total, or absolute, war. This reflected his personal as well as the Prussian experience with the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon. His ideal type of war was indeed unlimited in scope; any lesser effort meant lost effectiveness in proportion to its deviation from the inherent, true nature of war. With the defeat of Napoleon, the restoration of the European balance of power, and the development of Prussia's strategic problems, however, Clausewitz gradually recognized the existence of a type of limited war that was, in reality, much more common than total war.[17] In this type of limited war, the enemy's army was no longer the center of gravity, and the optimal strategy was not a search for the decisive battle.

Clausewitz's discovery of the prevalence of limited war in turn led to the evolution of his concept of the primacy of politics. The absolute or total war has, in theory, its own logic and momentum, which is in reality subject to the constraints imposed by the political interests of the state. Vital interests call for an

This content downloaded from
212.219.61.210 on Sat, 13 Sep 2025 07:57:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

unlimited war effort, while secondary interests justify no more than a limited investment of resources and effort. Thus, the *importance of the belligerents' stakes* in a war as defined by their political leaders, as well as their reciprocal interaction, determines whether the war remains limited in scope.

A second reason to limit the effort expended in war concerns *the relative strength and means available* to the belligerents. Nevertheless, if insufficient resources or strength were the only reasons for limiting a war effort, the "operational theory of war" or other nonpolitical factors would be enough to determine whether a war should be limited or expanded. Clausewitz's explication of the theory of limited war and the primacy of politics provides the crucial missing dimension for such determinations. Even if he had not made this "discovery," Clausewitz might still have begun to appreciate the prevalence of limited war, by viewing it as a function of insufficient means to wage all-out war. Nevertheless, his later recognition of limited war was based primarily on political considerations. In a truly limited war as defined by the political authorities, weak motivation to fight is enough to fetter the war effort of an otherwise stronger state. Thus, the degree to which a war will be limited is, in the end, determined by political and military considerations of relative strength.[18]

Clausewitz also distinguishes between defensive and offensive limited wars. Limited war normally occurs when the defending side has no incentive to go to war or when a weaker side is attacked by the stronger one. In such instances, the defense allows the passive or weaker side to wage war at the lowest possible cost while stalling until the opponent gives up, allies come to assist, or the defender can move over to the attack.

If a state's objectives are confined to the acquisition of a relatively small amount of territory, for annexation or bargaining purposes, it pursues a correspondingly limited war. At times a limited offensive can take a preemptive form, in order to forestall an enemy attack or secure a better forward defensive position. Clausewitz also concludes that limited offensives strengthen the attacker if the territory thereby acquired is adjacent to its own—but they can actually weaken the attacker if the same territory is noncontiguous. In addition, Clausewitz argues that if an offensive leaves the attacker's own territory vulnerable to a counterattack, the would-be attacker is better off preserving territorial integrity than acquiring territory of marginal value.

Another special type of limited war identified by Clausewitz drew Corbett's interest as well: a situation in which one state assists another in making a limited contribution to a common cause. This involves sending

> a moderately-sized force [to] . . . help; but if things go wrong, the operation is pretty well written off, and one tries to withdraw at the smallest possible cost. It is

This content downloaded from
212.219.61.210 on Sat, 13 Sep 2025 07:57:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> traditional . . . for states to make offensive and defensive pacts for mutual support—though not to the point of fully espousing one another's interests and quarrels. Regardless of the purpose of the war or the scale of the enemy's exertions, they pledge each other in advance to contribute a fixed and usually modest force. . . . It would all be tidier . . . if the contingent promised . . . were placed entirely at the ally's disposal and he were free to use it as he wished. It would then in effect be a hired force. But that is far from what really happens. The auxiliary force usually operates under its own commander; he is dependent only on his own government, and the objective the latter sets him will be as ambiguous as its aims. . . . The affair is more often like a business deal. In the light of the risks he expects and dividend he hopes for, each will invest about 30,000 to 40,000 men and behave as if that were all he stood to lose. . . . Even when both share a major interest, action is clogged with diplomatic reservations, and as a rule the negotiators only pledge a small and limited contingent (*On War,* p. 603).[19]

After summarizing Clausewitz's (and Jomini's) discussion of limited war (*Some Principles,* pp. 41–51), Corbett asserts that Clausewitz "never apprehended the full significance of his [own] brilliant theory. His outlook was still purely continental, and the limitations of continental warfare tend to veil the fuller meaning of the principle he had framed." Corbett then suggests that since Clausewitz's death had doomed his theory to a perpetually unfinished state, he (Corbett) would adapt Clausewitz's theory of limited war "to modern imperial conditions, and above all where the maritime element forcibly asserts itself . . . with its far-reaching effects for a maritime and above all an insular Power" (*Some Principles,* p. 52). In the process of brilliantly adapting Clausewitz's theory to the unique circumstances of naval warfare, particularly to the needs of British strategy, Corbett actually developed his own innovative theory of limited war in maritime strategy.

The cult of the offensive so dominated the thinking of his contemporaries that the essence of Corbetts' outwardly controversial message was not really heard.

Corbett undoubtedly intuitively understood the nature of this subject from his own historical research, but Clausewitz provided him with, first, the ideal expression, "limited war," and, second, the conceptual framework for a nascent theory that did not emphasize all-out war in search of a decisive battle. This gave Corbett the impetus to make the transition from the "higher," continental, unlimited form of strategy to its "lower," maritime, limited form. Corbett's original—not derivative—theory not only transcends that of Clausewitz but also adds an important new dimension to naval strategy. While Corbett was convinced that death alone had kept Clausewitz from eventually reaching the same conclusions, it is unlikely that Clausewitz would have progressed along these

This content downloaded from
212.219.61.210 on Sat, 13 Sep 2025 07:57:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

lines without direct experience in maritime warfare or familiarity with naval or imperial history (see endnote 18). Corbett himself mentions that although Jomini wrote a chapter on "On Great Invasions and Distant Expeditions," his "entirely continental thought had failed to penetrate the subject" (*Some Principles*, p. 56).[20]

From his naval and broader imperial perspective, Corbett found Clausewitz's theory of limited war marred by its narrow, continental focus (*Some Principles*, p. 54). He therefore began to construct his own ideal paradigm of limited war, at first by exposing the weaknesses of Clausewitz's argument. The first of his two main points is that in wartime conditions on the continent, as opposed to those in the maritime and imperial environment, wars were fought mostly between adjacent states. This, in Corbett's opinion, made escalation almost inevitable. "Such territory is usually an organic part of your enemy's country, or otherwise of so much importance to him that he will be willing to use unlimited effort to retain it" (*Some Principles*, p. 54). This critique holds true as far as it goes, but Clausewitz cannot be accused of neglecting the question of escalation; in fact, he was acutely aware of the inherent tendency of war to escalate.[21] Corbett's second point is that in wars between contiguous continental states "there will be no strategical obstacle to his [the enemy's] being able to use his whole force" (*Some Principles*, pp. 54–5). In other words, the nature of continental war makes it difficult to limit political aims, because one or both states are able to use all of the means at their disposal to protect the inevitably threatened vital interests. A nation fights a maritime and imperial war not on contiguous territory but overseas or in remote, peripheral areas that do not threaten the other belligerent's vital interests. Thus, escalation in this environment is not unavoidable, because the opponent can limit his political aims or escalate according to his own discretion.

Another crucial difference between continental and maritime warfare is that in the maritime environment, the dominant naval power can isolate the theater of war to prevent the introduction of enemy reinforcements as well as secure its home defense. As Corbett demonstrates, this means that the conditions for the ideal limited war exist only in maritime warfare and can only be exploited by the preponderant naval power: "Limited war is only permanently possible to island Powers or between Powers which are separated by sea, and then only when the Power desiring limited war is able to command the sea to such a degree as to be able not only to isolate the distant object, but also to render impossible the invasion of his home territory" (*Some Principles*, p. 57).

As long as its navy is strong enough to protect its home from invasion, an island naval power enjoys a unique advantage that Sun Tzu would have appreciated.[22] From this invulnerable position such a navy can, at its own discretion, project its limited land power while preventing the enemy from doing the same. Even if a naval power is weaker in absolute terms, it can not only hold its own but

This content downloaded from
212.219.61.210 on Sat, 13 Sep 2025 07:57:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

also use its power overseas to compete with more powerful land powers. This, in Corbett's estimation, was the secret of British power; it explained how "a small country with a weak army should have been able to gather to herself the most desirable regions of the earth, and to gather them at the expense of the greatest military Powers. . . . It remained for Clausewitz, unknown to himself, to discover that explanation, and he reveals it to us in the inherent strength of limited war" (*Some Principles,* pp. 58–9).

In reality, Clausewitz's theory cannot claim credit for this explanation of the expansion of British power. This can be attributed solely to Corbett's own development of a new form of limited war in the unique maritime environment. Clausewitz's theory describes a defensive limited war necessitated by a state's limited ambitions or weakness, while Corbett's demonstrates how limited strength, coupled with a suitable strategy and a particular set of circumstances, can be used to expand the power of the state. For Clausewitz, as we know, the decision to wage a limited war was first and foremost a political one (which can also depend on the availability of means). Corbett takes his theory of the ideal-type maritime limited war one step farther, as a new method of war. In doing so, he moves away from political considerations and concentrates on the most effective use of limited means, by grafting his own ideal type of the true limited war onto Clausewitz's concept of "war by limited contingency" (*On War,* p. 603). The result is an integrated theory of combined naval and land operations, one that allows a small but effective naval power (under the ideal conditions described above) to maximize the effectiveness of the limited means at its disposal. The success of such a "war by limited contingency" hinges upon "the intimacy with which naval and military action can be combined to give the contingent a weight and mobility that are beyond its intrinsic power" (*Some Principles,* pp. 62–3). This is a case where the result achieved is truly more than the sum of its parts.

Another advantage of "war by limited contingency," in which one deploys a "disposal force," is that even if all fails, the possible gains outweigh the risks entailed (*Some Principles,* p. 69). When availing itself of this method, a state has the choice of fighting with either limited or unlimited means. Indeed, in the Peninsular War, which provided the perfect conditions for a "war by limited contingency," Britain had applied "the limited form to an unlimited war. Our object was unlimited. It was nothing less than the overthrow of Napoleon. Complete success at sea had failed to do it, but that success had given us the power of applying the limited form, which was the most decisive form of offence within our means" (*Some Principles,* p. 65). While the continental version of "war by limited contingency" invariably escalates into an unlimited form, the maritime (British) version can remain limited (*Some Principles,* p. 66).

This content downloaded from
212.219.61.210 on Sat, 13 Sep 2025 07:57:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Obtaining "unlimited" results with limited force—the type of force multiplier found in Corbett's paradigm of the ideal limited war—can of course be identified with the theory of Sun Tzu, who says, "Thus the potential of troops skillfully commanded in battle may be compared to that of round boulders which roll down from the mountain heights." According to the commentators Chang Yu and Tu Mu, this means that "the force applied is minute but the results are enormous," and "one needs . . . but little strength to achieve much" (*The Art of War,* p. 95).

Thus, Corbett ultimately devised a particular method of using maritime power that Clausewitz could not have considered. This method is admittedly relevant for only a small number of naval powers, but those to whom it applies can parlay their limited resources into the attainment of ambitious political objectives without risking escalation or defeat (*Some Principles,* p. 77). Corbett likens this aspect of his concept to the advantages enjoyed by the defense, which "sometimes enable an inferior force to gain its end against a superior one." The drawbacks of the defense do not, however, apply here. Limited war allows the naval power to maintain the initiative both on the strategic and tactical levels, depending on the circumstances. Under the favorable conditions of Corbett's ideal limited war, the naval power can assume an offensive posture almost immediately (on the tactical or strategic levels) without exposing itself to unacceptable risks. This type of transition would take much longer to accomplish in continental warfare. Corbett then concludes that "the limited form of war has this element of strength over and above the unlimited form. . . . The point is of the highest importance, for it is a direct negation of the current doctrine that in war there can be but one legitimate object, the overthrow of the enemy's means of resistance, and that the primary objective must always be his armed forces" (*Some Principles,* p. 74).

Having thus aroused the suspicion of his contemporaries with his praise of limited war and with the implied passivity of equating it with the defense, Corbett makes a painfully obvious attempt to reassure his readers. To the statement that all forms of war "demand the use of battles" he adds that achieving favorable circumstances for the ideal limited war depends first on the overthrow of the enemy's naval forces (*Some Principles,* pp. 86–7). Corbett's theory is also the answer to the chimerical search for the decisive battle, in that he uses the "lower means" of war to secure the positive results necessary for an eventual move to the "higher form" if necessary.

* * * * * * *

In *The Development of Military Thought in the Nineteenth Century,* Azar Gat describes *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* as "an etude on Clausewitz."[23] This

This content downloaded from
212.219.61.210 on Sat, 13 Sep 2025 07:57:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

statement entirely underestimates Corbett's originality and contribution to strategic theory. Clausewitz's *On War* was an invaluable basis and stimulus for Corbett's theoretical work—but not its blueprint. For example, Corbett did not hesitate to take issue with Clausewitz on the importance of the search for the decisive battle and the principle of concentration. The fact that Corbett believed these factors to be far less relevant at sea was a daring departure from the accepted wisdom of his time. In developing his theory of limited war, Corbett again used *On War* as his point of departure but ended up with his own, unique method of waging a limited war in a maritime environment. By inclination and through the influence of the British style of warfare, Corbett has more in common with Sun Tzu than with Clausewitz.

As a counter-factual, we might ask whether Clausewitz would have made any changes in *On War* had he read Corbett's principles of naval strategy. The answer, I believe, is a qualified yes. It would have apprised him of the contribution of naval power to continental warfare, perhaps inspiring him to add a chapter on the "pure" maritime limited war and some exceptions to the principle of concentration in naval war. Moreover, it might have provided him with some incentive to discuss the economic and financial aspects of war, including economic blockade, as part of attrition warfare.

While Mahan's theory is a good example of the theory of war at sea as influenced by the classical theory of land warfare, Corbett's theory arrives at some original insights that contradict the conventional wisdom of the continental strategists. Is Corbett's work as important or original as that of Clausewitz? Clearly not. *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* is more repetitive and parochial than *On War,* and it focuses on the narrower aspects of British maritime strategy. I cannot judge Corbett's place among naval historians, but I believe that he belongs at the top of the second tier in the pantheon of classical strategic theorists.

* * * * * * *

As an afterthought, it is interesting to note that in the age of modern airpower, Corbett's theory of limited war can acquire a degree of relevance perhaps exceeding that which its author envisioned. Today, the sustained projection of airpower, combined with the use of precision guided munitions, presents conditions that fit Corbett's requirements: namely, a remote overseas battlefield that can be isolated by naval superiority and that allows the projection, insertion, and removal of land forces at will. The sustained command of the air—together with day and night fighting capabilities and long-range, precision firepower—can create the isolation necessary for a limited war in any region of the world. This scenario would, however, require complete air superiority as well as

This content downloaded from
212.219.61.210 on Sat, 13 Sep 2025 07:57:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the continuous projection of airpower for a prolonged period of time. The projection of land power would, in this case, be supported by air or naval power (instead of by naval power alone). Modern airpower can extend its reach beyond that of the old naval power concept, because it depends far less on uniquely advantageous geographic conditions. The isolation of a chosen battlefield could be achieved artificially by precision fire from the air. Such use of airpower could work in a conventional war (as in Korea, for example), but not in guerrilla-type warfare. Such isolation of the battlefield was almost achieved in the Korean War, although airpower could not then be used both by day and night, nor was long-range, precision guided firepower available.

Although such a strategy could not work in the Vietnam War, because of the nature of guerrilla warfare, it performed quite well in the milieu of the Gulf War. Current and future military technologies will therefore, under ideal conditions, be able to isolate artificially a battlefield for implementation of Corbett's "limited contingency war" concept.

NOTES

1. I. B. Cohen, *The Newtonian Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980), chap. 4, pp. 157–221.
2. See, for example, Azar Gat, *The Development of Military Thought: The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 190; and Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Naval Strategy Compared and Contrasted with the Principles and Practice of Military Operations on Land* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1911), p. 17.
3. The first good English translation of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War,* that of Lionel Giles, was published in 1910, while most of Corbett's ideas in *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (London: Longman, 1911) had been developed much earlier. See also "The Green Pamphlet" of 1909, as reprinted in Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy,* ed. Eric J. Grove (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1988), pp. 305–45. The citations in the text for *Some Principles* refer to this edition; those for *On War* to Carl von Clausewitz, *On War,* ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984); and those for *The Art of War* to Sun Tzu, *The Art of War,* trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971).
4. See Donald M. Schurman, *The Education of a Navy* (London: Cassell, 1965) on Corbett's conclusions in *England in the Seven Years' War,* 2 vols. (London: 1907), p. 168.
5. See Clausewitz, *On War,* pp. 88–9; and Corbett, *Some Principles* (paraphrasing Clausewitz), pp. 5–6, 17–8, 27–8, and chap. 2, p. 31ff.
6. Schurman, *Education of a Navy,* p. 164.
7. Although Clausewitz indeed emphasizes the importance of the decisive battle, all other things being equal, he also points (as does Corbett) to the great risks and costs involved, and he mentions alternative methods. However, when Clausewitz *does* emphasize the destruction of the enemy, he is not always referring to physical destruction alone but also to psychological and moral destruction as well (see *On War,* 1.2, p. 97).
8. This is Clausewitz's "principle of continuity."
9. See Donald M. Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett, 1854–1922* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1981), pp. 168–9, 194.
10. Schurman, *Education of a Navy,* p. 174 n (referring to Cyril Falls, *The Art of War: From the Age of Napoleon to the Present Day*

This content downloaded from
212.219.61.210 on Sat, 13 Sep 2025 07:57:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

[London and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961], p. 44).

11. In *On War,* Clausewitz recognizes a similar phenomenon on at least one major occasion. Napoleon concentrated such a formidable invasion force against Russia in 1812 that he caused the Russians to withdraw rather than fight. Had he concentrated a small, less obviously superior force at the outset, the Russians might have accepted battle on or close to the border, thus enabling Napoleon to win through superior generalship.

12. See chapter 1, "Estimates": "When he is united, divide him" (p. 69). See also chapter 6, "Weakness and Strengths": "If I am able to determine the enemy's dispositions while at the same time I conceal my own then I can concentrate and he must divide. And if I concentrate while he divides, I can use my entire strength to attack a fraction of his" (p. 98). Further, on the same page, "The enemy must not know where I intend to give battle. For if he does not know where I intend to give battle he must prepare in a great many places. And when he prepares in a great many places, those I have to fight in any one place will be few."

13. See Michael I. Handel, ed., *Clausewitz and Modern Strategy* (London: Frank Cass, 1986).

14. Schurman, *Education of a Navy,* p. 161 n.

15. In the conclusion of his study of the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), Corbett notes that the Japanese navy never lost its offensive spirit despite its predominantly defensive role. His last sentence reads: "It is here, then, if anywhere, in this enduring capacity to withstand the demoralizing influence of a prolonged defensive, that the Japanese showed upon the sea, at any rate, a distinctly higher genius for war than their enemy." Julian S. Corbett, *Maritime Operations in the Russo-Japanese War, 1904–1905,* vol. 2 (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1994), p. 398.

16. Julian S. Corbett, *The Campaign of Trafalgar* (London: Longman, 1910), p. 408.

17. For an excellent discussion, see Azar Gat, *The Origins of Military Thought from the Enlightenment to Clausewitz* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 217–26.

18. Clausewitz's analysis of limited war as defined by its *political objectives* (or national interests) on the one hand and by the *available means* (or limitation of resources) on the other, can be described by four possible combinations. The first, which is limited in terms of both politics and resources, indicates a war that does not involve any major interests and is fought either defensively or to gain some minor bargaining advantages. It follows, then, that only very limited means would be dedicated to its execution. The second type of war, although unlimited in its political objectives, is subject to the constraints imposed by limited resources. This could be a weaker state fighting for vital interests or a war on a particular front that is part of a larger unlimited war (e.g., Wellington's campaign in Spain, in which a limited British contingent fought for an unlimited objective—the overthrow of Napoleon and the restoration of the European balance of power).

The third type is limited by its political objectives. Although the war might involve the vital interests of one state, it does not involve the vital interests of the other. None of the belligerents intends to win a decisive, total victory. Yet despite these limited political objectives, such a war can often involve the expenditure of unlimited resources. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 and the Vietnam War are good examples. With its limited and well-defined political objectives, Japan neither intended nor expected to overthrow Russia; yet by the end of the war Japan had nearly exhausted its human, financial, and material resources. In the Vietnam War, the United States never intended to overthrow North Vietnam but ended up spending vast amounts of resources on the war effort anyway.

The fourth type represents the ideal type of an unlimited, or total, war. This involves attaining unlimited objectives, such as the overthrow of the enemy, and the corresponding use of all available resources. Although this kind of war might be waged initially by one side alone, its nature would normally force all other participants to do so as well. Typical of Napoleonic strategy, this "higher form" of war achieved its most extreme manifestation in the First and Second World Wars. As Clausewitz points out, the frequently occurring transitions from one type of war to another reflect the reciprocal nature of war and the way in which one belligerent's decisions affect those of his opponent. While

This content downloaded from
212.219.61.210 on Sat, 13 Sep 2025 07:57:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the decision to wage a limited war of one type or another would often require a tacit or explicit agreement by both sides, escalation from limited to unlimited war can be dictated by one side alone.

19. For a direct discussion of limited war in *On War*, see Note of 27 July 1827, pp. 69–71; Book 1, chap. 1, pp. 87–8; Book 6, chap. 30, pp. 501–21; Book 7, chap. 16, pp. 548–50; and Book 8. The issue of limited war as limited by means is, by implication, discussed throughout the book. Corbett summarizes Clausewitz's theory of limited war in *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, pp. 41–51.

20. See Baron de Jomini, *The Art of War* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977), pp. 361–90.

21. Clausewitz made it clear that "transitions from one type to the other [i.e., from limited to unlimited war] are likely." *On War*, Note of 27 July 1827, p. 69.

22. "It follows that those skilled in war can make themselves invincible." Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), p. 85, and chap. 4 in general.

23. Gat, *Development of Military Thought*, p. 218.

This content downloaded from
212.219.61.210 on Sat, 13 Sep 2025 07:57:16 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms