

Clausewitz's Friction in War and the United States'
Invasion of Iraq

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Introduction

Carl Von Clausewitz described *friction in war* as: "Countless minor incidents – the kind you can never really foresee – combine to lower the general level of performance so that one always falls short of the intended goal. Friction is the only concept that corresponds to the factors that distinguish real war from war on paper. Friction, as we choose to call it, is the force that makes the apparently easy so difficult."² Insurgency in Iraq started as a minor incident but later grew into a monstrous situation. Friction as defined by Stephen Cimbala is: "The discrepancy between initial expectations held by policymakers and commanders about how events will unfold and the reality later apparent to most contemporary and historical observers."³ Simply put, frictions are those numerous unpredictable circumstances that normally arise during the execution of a plan of war. This, in the end, affects the execution and the result of the plan. In a

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² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, eds. Michael Howard, Peter Paret (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 139-140.

³ Stephen Cimbala, *Clausewitz, and Chaos: Friction in War and Military Policy* (Westport: Praeger, 2001), p. 13.

real war, the element of unpredictability is always there, and it is the unpredictable nature of friction that differentiates actual battles from war plans. The advent of insurgency is the friction of war that affected the United State of America and its military plans in Iraq. This unforeseen event completely changed the outcome of the American invasion of Iraq, which further triggered so many changes to the battle plans, troop morale, image of the US, purpose, and benefit of the invasion. It also encouraged and spiked Islamic fundamentalism and extremism globally.

Anyone without personal experience of war cannot understand from where these difficulties or frictions might come.⁴ To manage friction, even a good general requires the mind of a genius, good judgement, tact, consultation, right intuition, and extraordinary intelligence.⁵ According to Clausewitz: "Everything is very simple in war, but the simplest thing is difficult. These difficulties accumulate and produce a friction, which no man can imagine exactly who has not seen war."⁶ Clausewitz also explained that commanders might have put the most perfect war plan together but so many minor issues can lead to its disruption. These could happen because of human nature, timing, danger, human error, lack of discipline and even bodily exertions, which could arise from inadequate training.⁷

Clausewitz also mentioned the importance of chance as a form of friction. Chance is also totally out of anyone's control when it comes to war plans and it is unpredictable. For example, the change of weather could bring fog or rain that could affect so many things in the war including signals, vision, movement, and efficiency of the equipment.⁸ Clausewitz further explained the knowledge of friction, as one of the most important things a good general must have in war, and it cannot be learned theoretically but only acquired through experience.⁹ There is always a solution to such frictions, but the solution might end up destroying the plan completely or affect it negatively.

⁴ von Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 139-140.

⁵ von Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 139-140.

⁶ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Anatol Rapaport (Toronto, Penguin, 1982), p. 164.

⁷ von Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 164-165.

⁸ von Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 166.

⁹ von Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 166-167.

According to Clausewitz, only “Iron will, and power can overcome this friction; it pulverizes every obstacle, but of course, it wears down the machine as well.”¹⁰ Clausewitz explained the eight main causes of friction in war as inadequate or wrong information about the enemy, danger, physical exertions, chance, the limit of use of force, provisions for troops, the relationship with the enemy, and inadequate cooperation among the soldiers.¹¹ These main causes and their relevance to the contemporary situation and modern warfare have been analyzed by Barry Watts in a comprehensive manner.¹²

Insurgency in Iraq

Friction in War is one of the most enduring theories of Clausewitz and is still very relevant in our contemporary situation. There would still be uncertainty and unpredictability in war because so many circumstances and factors could change the tide of war and affect its outcome. The factor of chance will continue to play an important and crucial role in warfare because those are things one cannot control and predict, for example, modern technology could not predict insurgency. This is real, one cannot plan for the unknown, one can make adequate plans for surprises, but one cannot prevent them from happening. You can take car insurance against accidents or theft, but you cannot predict when you will have an accident. You could get another car from your insurance company but somehow your driving record is affected, which might increase your premium.

According to Benoit Durieux: “One of the most striking features of the Clausewitzian bibliography is the contact between the perennial fame of the Prussian general and the recurrent judgement that his ideas are outdated, useless, incomprehensible, or dangerous.”¹³ Realistically speaking, it does not matter how much literature is out there challenging the relevance of Clausewitz because some of his

¹⁰ von Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 138.

¹¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *Principles of War*, ed. Hans Gatzke (New York: Dover, 1942), pp., 62-69.

¹² Barry Watts, *Clausewitzian Friction and Future War* (Washington DC: McNair Paper, 1996), p. 32.

¹³ Benoit Durieux, “Clausewitz and the Two Temptations of Modern Thinking,” in *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Hew Strachan, Andreas Herberg-Rothe (London: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 251.

theories and ideas are still very relevant to us today, especially the issue of Friction in War.¹⁴ The advent of globalization, advancements in satellite, cable technology, and other means of communication would not predict some things that could happen because insurgency for example started suddenly, and unexpectedly, it was not planned, it was a reaction to the invasion of Iraq by the USA. Despite all the modern-day technology and scientific advancement in predicting the weather, it is still not perfect. The weather report does have errors and we see this on regular basis.

The uncertainty and unpredictability of the nature of war are very much important in today's military planning and intelligence estimation, especially with the advent of insurgency and terrorism. It is even more difficult to plan against an enemy that you cannot define or locate at will. The advancement in modern science and technology has proven futile so far in fighting insurgency and terrorism because, despite all the efforts of the US and its NATO allies, insurgency across the globe continues to wax stronger. A recent study sponsored by the Office of the Director of Net Assessment in the Office of the Secretary of Defence in the United States confirms the current uncertainty and unpredictability of war: "Future warfare is very uncertain. We do not know, for example, who the US opponents will be (from a single country to some opposition coalition), what their objectives will be, how will they attempt to win, what military technologies they will possess, what kind of force structure they will have, and how they will employ their forces."¹⁵

While addressing a Harvard seminar on information policy in 1997, Lieutenant General Kenneth Minihan of the United States Air Force and former Director of Defence Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency supported the irrelevance of Clausewitz to contemporary military planning because of advancements in technology.¹⁶

Studies have shown frictions of war, which nobody foresaw or even envisaged that have affected recent modern warfare and battles like the Falkland Island War, the

¹⁴ Durieux, "Clausewitz and the Two Temptations of Modern Thinking," pp. 251-252.

¹⁵ Bruce Bennett, Sam Gardiner, Daniel Fox, K. J. Witney, *Theater Analysis and Modeling in an era of Uncertainty: The Present and Future Warfare* (Santa Monica: Rand, 1994), p. xv.

¹⁶ Cimbala, *Clausewitz and Chaos*, p. 5.

Vietnam War, Israel's invasion of Lebanon and the invasion of Grenada.¹⁷ Friction in war is very real and can be applied to explain and analyze contemporary international relations dilemmas. Katherine Herbig summed it up in her article: "Unlike some of the ideas in *On War* whose relevance is now merely heuristic, understanding what Clausewitz says about chance and uncertainty in war can be applied directly to illuminate current military dilemmas."¹⁸

Steven Metz summarized it when he argued that "By no stretch of the imagination has the U.S. occupation of Iraq been brutal or repressive, but it has had its miscalculations. There was a serious underestimation of the work needed to secure, stabilize, and reconstruct Iraq after Saddam Hussein's regime had been toppled."¹⁹ These miscalculations are the frictions of war that the US or anybody could have anticipated before invading Iraq. According to Ian Beckett, "The continuing proliferation of insurgent organizations suggests that insurgency is still widely perceived as an effective means either of achieving power and influence or of bringing a cause to the notice of an international or national community."²⁰ The argument of Beckett is very obvious to the world that though the world did not plan for it when it started in Iraq, it has been adopted by many groups all over the world who found the tactics very valuable and sustainable. For example, the insurgency in Iraq influenced the foundation of so many groups in the world including Boko Haram in Nigeria, and Al Shabaab in Somalia. Beckett further argues that "Certainly Islamic fundamentalism, which might be regarded more as an ideology than an expressly religious conviction, has emerged as a new imperative behind the insurgency."²¹

The US war planners did not consider the religious ideological differences that were in existence before the invasion. If they had considered the religious dynamics of Iraq, they would have prepared for the impact of the change of government from the

¹⁷ Derrick Mercer, Geoff Mungham, Kevin William, eds., *The Fog of War: Media on the Battlefield* (London, Heinemann: 1987), pp. xv-xvi.

¹⁸ Katherine Herbig, "Chance and Uncertainty in *On War*," in *Clausewitz and Modern Strategy*, ed. M. Handel (London: Frank Cass, 1986), pp. 95-96.

¹⁹ Steven Metz, "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq," *The Washington Quarterly* 27, No. 1 (Winter 2003-2004): pp. 26-27.

²⁰ Ian F.W. Beckett, *Insurgency in Iraq: An Historical Perspective* (Carlisle: US Army War College Press, January 2005), p. 1.

²¹ Beckett, *Insurgency in Iraq*, p. 1.

Sunnis to the Shiites. The US did not consider that most of the people of Iraq are Shiites with a considerable amount of influence from neighbouring Iran, while the Sunnis who have dominated power since the time of the Ottoman Empire up to the advent of Saddam Hussein were minorities and have held on to power with brutal force. The insurgency is made up of Sunni groups who wanted to restore the political power and influence they lost because of the US invasion and removal of Saddam Hussein.²²

The US thought the removal of Saddam Hussein and his supporters from power would solve the problems of Iraq and its threat to peace in the Middle East.²³ President Bush was happy, as were all his commanders that they have accomplished victory with minimal casualties to American lives. However, they did not consider that the minimal or lack lustre resistance they received from Iraqi troops had more to do with their support for the removal of Saddam Hussein than the occupation of their country by the US or any foreign power.²⁴ This is in line with Metz's argument when he notes that "What began a few weeks after the fall of Saddam's regime as sporadic and disorganized attacks against U.S. troops by small armed groups has now grown into a sophisticated campaign using remotely triggered explosives and complex combinations of weapons as well as shoulder-held anti-aircraft missiles."²⁵ It is argued here that the unseen friction of war in Iraq started as a small resistance that later produced powerful and destructive elements such as al-Qaeda in Iraq led by Abu Mus'ab az-Zarqawi, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or the Levant (ISIS or ISIL) led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and many other small splinter groups that have made Iraq ungovernable for its majority Shiite new leaders and the US which is their main supporter.

As suggested by Tomas Kavalek, the insurgency that started as a small-scale resistance to the US invasion of Iraq has expanded and become powerful by 2015 to the extent of forming a "caliphate" from territories they controlled in Iraq and Syria.²⁶ The insurgents introduced a new deadly weapon into the annals of warfare, the improvised

²² Beckett, *Insurgency in Iraq*, pp. 1-2.

²³ Beckett, *Insurgency in Iraq*, pp. 2-3.

²⁴ Beckett, *Insurgency in Iraq*, pp. 3-4.

²⁵ Metz, "Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq," p. 30.

²⁶ Tomas Kavalek, "From al-Qaeda in Iraq to Islamic State: The Story of Insurgency in Iraq and Syria in 2003-2015," *Alternatives Turkish Journal of International Relations* 14, No. 1, (Spring 2015): p. 11.

explosive devices (IED).²⁷ The insurgents used IEDs to wreak havoc on both coalition and Iraqi troops in Iraq. The insurgents further extended their attacks on innocent civilians to cause fear and disorder in Iraq. The Iraq war, according to A. Ramasamy, S. Harrison, M.P.M. Stewart, and M. Midwinter, had “evolved from asymmetric warfare to a counter-insurgency operation.”²⁸ The friction in the war, which presented itself as insurgency to the coalition forces led by the US, completely changed the war from conventional warfare into counterinsurgency and counter-subversion warfare.

The issue of insurgency is a current military dilemma that has continued to worry military generals on the field and in the Pentagon. Some will even ask how the generals and defence officials failed to identify the likelihood or possibility of insurgency in Iraq. Some say it was the failure of intelligence. In any case, the Americans simply did not prepare for it. They did not envisage it and it came as a great surprise to many except the insurgents themselves. Insurgency in Iraq has all the characteristics of friction of war. It was not planned for, it came suddenly, it unbalanced American troops and their generals, it was devastating in its effect on the war operations, and it cost Americans much in terms of human lives and materials. America had to experiment with several strategies and tactics in order to reorganize and change its strategy before it was able to contain and control the insurgency. The surge of troops did work to some extent, but it did not eliminate the problem. Skeptics about the relevance of Clausewitz or *friction in war* should take a second look at the insurgency in Iraq. It is a good example of how uncertain a war can be.

The US Department of Defence defines insurgency as: “An organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict.”²⁹ According to Elaheh Rostami-Povey, the insurgency in Iraq can be divided into three phases, 2003 to 2006 when it started and the main targets were American and coalition troops, 2006 to 2008 when the insurgency developed into factions that led to sectarian civil war but still with America and the coalition forces as

²⁷ Kavalek, “From al-Qaeda in Iraq to Islamic State,” p. 12.

²⁸ A. Ramasamy, S. Harrison, M.P.M. Stewart, M. Midwinter, “Penetrating missile injuries during the Iraqi insurgency” (*TRAUMA: Annal of the Royal College of Surgeons of England* 91 (2009): p. 551.

²⁹ Thomas Mockaitis, *Iraq, and the Challenge of Counterinsurgency* (Westport: Praeger, 2008), p. 16.

the primary targets, and 2008 to the present when the insurgency was internationalized and spread to other parts of the world, namely the Middle East, Asia and Africa.³⁰

Insurgency is a product of bad governance; it arises when a part of the population feels neglected and not catered for by the ruling elites or when they believe that their interest is not well represented.³¹ Al Qaeda used the opportunity of dissatisfaction to use Iraq as a launching pad. Abu Musab al Zarqawi reigned until his death, which did not change anything. The Sunnis who were major supporters of Saddam Hussein have been blamed for the insurgency but the emergence of the Shiite leader, Muqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army has also proved the cause of the insurgency to be the general annoyance of the populace with the American invaders.³² Stephen Pelletiere supports this argument when he said: "The Iraqis, having been thoroughly disaffected by the Americans' maladroitness in administering the occupation, had all (except the Kurds) turned against them; many we must assume having joined the resistance."³³ Al Baghdadi with his Islamic Caliphate elevated insurgency to its greatest height until he and his followers were destroyed. The destruction of the caliphate did not eliminate insurgency, it only weakened it.

No one knew insurgency would emerge, nobody planned for it. It was part of the uncertainty in war and it was simply friction of war. It is important to note that America and the members of the so-called *coalition of the willing* did not expect insurgency because based on the information on the ground and the nature of the people of Iraq, terrorism is not a tool they have used before to achieve their goals. It is alien to them although it might be common among other Arabs in the Middle East.

No one could have foretold the possible emergence of an insurgency because it is friction and uncertain and cannot be measured and calculated. If war planners could discover in advance the possibility of insurgents, who would use terror and suicide bombings to achieve their aims and objectives, American casualties in Iraq would have been so low that most people would have attested to the efficiency and perfection of the

³⁰ Elaheh Rostami-Povey, *Iran's Influence: A Religious-Political State and Society in Its Region* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2010), pp. 130–154,

³¹ Mockaitis, *Iraq, and the Challenge of Counterinsurgency*.

³² Mohammed Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007), p. 38.

³³ Stephen Pelletiere, *Losing Iraq: Insurgency and Politics* (Westport: Praeger, 2007), p. 67.

war planners. The *surge* tactics or strategy introduced by General David Petraeus when he was Commander of United States Central Command (CENTCOM), worked to some extent and reduced the insurgency but it did not eliminate it because the insurgents, regrouped, and came back in full force to continue to attack American soldiers. Petraeus's surge tactics were in line with the third mathematical equation arguments of Larry Blank, Carl E. Enomoto, Douglas Gegax, Thomas McGuckin, and Cade Simmons that "The size of the US-led coalition increases, and the number of insurgent attacks decreases."³⁴ They further argue that, "There is evidence that the surge has worked. Multiple fatality bombings have decreased along with the number of Iraqi civilian deaths. Furthermore, Iraqi citizens who fled Iraq are now starting to return."³⁵

However, the surge tactics did not last for long because the insurgents intensified their attacks in Iraq. The suicide bombers and IEDs continue, killing a countless number of people in Iraq. According to the US Department of Defense casualty website, at point of writing, 4,608 US soldiers have been killed in Iraq and 2,448 US soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan. In total, 7,056 US soldiers have been killed both in Iraq and Afghanistan.³⁶ The same website also states that within the same period mentioned above, 32,529 US soldiers were wounded in Iraq and 20,722 were wounded in Afghanistan. In total, 53,251 US soldiers in total were wounded in both Iraq and Afghanistan.³⁷ More than 80 percent of these deaths and injuries were caused not because of direct regular combat but because of the activities of insurgence using IEDs and rocket-propelled grenades, landmines, light weapons and other non-conventional methods of fighting.

The friction in war, which the US did not plan for and did not envisage, in form of insurgency, changed the course of the war, affected troop morale and cost America and the coalition forces human lives and billions of dollars in terms of expenses. The American invasion of Iraq worsened the security situation in the Middle East and

³⁴ Larry Blank, Carl E. Enomoto, Douglas Gegax, Thomas McGuckin, and Cade Simmons, "A Dynamic Model of Insurgency: The Case of the War in Iraq," *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy* 14, 2 (2008): p. 1.

³⁵ Blank, et al, "A Dynamic Model of Insurgency," p. 23

³⁶ United States Department of Defence. <https://www.defense.gov/casualty.pdf> accessed on 3 April 2021.

³⁷ United States Department of Defence. <https://www.defense.gov/casualty.pdf>, accessed on 3 April 2021.

created a new group of power mongers, wreaking havoc, and hiding behind the veil of religion. Thomas Hegghammer suggests that:

There seems to be a broad consensus among terrorism experts that the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 has contributed negatively to the so-called "global war on terror." According to many analysts, the war and the subsequent occupation have increased the level of frustration in the Islamic world over American foreign policy and facilitated recruitment by militant Islamist groups. Moreover, Iraq seems to have replaced Afghanistan as a training ground where a new generation of Islamist militants can acquire military expertise and build personal relationships through the experience of combat and training camps.³⁸

Hegghammer is right. The US and its allies' miscalculations in invading Iraq jeopardized peace, stability, and tranquility in the Middle East and the world at large. The invasion of Iraq created more enemies for the United States and turned neutral and friendly elements into its adversaries. The absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the colossal loss of life and properties experienced by the Iraqis strongly supported the questioning of the rationale behind the invasion in the first instance. It is estimated that about 461,000 Iraqi civilians lost their lives during the invasion and occupation from 2003 to 2011 when America officially withdrew its troops.³⁹ The introduction and rise of insurgency led to the failure of the foreign and defence policy objectives of the United States of America in Iraq and the Middle East in general.

Conclusion

It is strongly posited here that the relevance of *friction of war* is still very important in making war plans. Friction in war is an idea that has been controversial because some believe it is still relevant, while others believe it is no longer relevant due

³⁸ Thomas Hegghammer, "Global Jihadism After the Iraq War," *The Middle East Journal* 60, No. 1 (2006): p. 11.

³⁹ Amy Hagopian, Abraham D. Flaxman, Tim K. Takaro, Sahar A. Esa Al Shatari, Julie Rajaratnam, Stan Becker, Alison Levin-Rector, Lindsay Galway, Berg J. Hadi Al-Yasseri, William M. Weiss, Christopher J. Murray, and Gilbert Burnham, "Mortality in Iraq Associated with the 2003–2011 War and Occupation: Findings from a National Cluster Sample Survey by the University Collaborative Iraq Mortality Study," *PLOS Medicine*, 15 October 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001533>

to the changing nature of warfare, the use of technology, and scientifically advanced weapon systems. However, a thorough examination of the current trends in warfare and conflicts supports the argument that friction in war is still very relevant and present in modern-day warfare and the most recent example is the development and introduction of insurgency after the American invasion of Iraq. The best political leaders and military commanders can produce excellent plans for war; however, some circumstances are beyond them which can change the outcome of the war. This is friction in war according to Carl von Clausewitz. It is also very relevant to the insurgency in Iraq which is a very important contemporary example in international relations and security. The issue of insurgency changed the outcome of the American invasion of Iraq. Insurgency introduced a new wave of terrorism in Iraq which has spread to other parts of the world, making it a trans-national enterprise. The importance of friction, which represents an aspect of the uncertainty, and the unpredictability of war is still very much with us today and cannot be wished away.

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