Modern Armed Forces and the Spread of the Idea of the Principles of War

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**Introduction**

The French military theorist Charles Ardant de Picq (1821–1870) once stated that ‘Man does not enter battle to fight, but for victory. He does everything that he can to avoid the first and obtain the second.’\(^1\) For obvious reasons, much military thought has focused on how to achieve victory in war. One of the clearest expressions of this tendency is the so-called principles of war. Gradually gaining recognition during the nineteenth century, the principles of war was considered ‘unchangeable’ and valid irrespective of time and place by influential military theorist Antoine Henri Jomini (1779-1869). Meanwhile in the interwar years, British military thinker J. F. C. Fuller (1878–1966) suggested that the principles were ‘eternal and fundamental’ and that they applied to every contest from a boxing match to military battle. Considering such ringing endorsements, it was not a surprise that the great powers increasingly started to institutionalise the principles of war as key parts of their doctrines during the twentieth century.

However, contrary to common perception, the principles of war are far from uncontested. Indeed, military historian John Alger argues that those who stress the principles of war are often not aware that they came to be regarded as ‘timeless’ truths only recently.\(^2\) The apparent universality and immutability of the principles may lead to notions that they have an obvious place in both doctrine and military theory. In fact, they have been constantly contested and criticised for being, among other things, imprecise, contradictory and invalid. Viewed from this angle, it suddenly becomes puzzling that all of the great powers, including present day alliances such as NATO, have institutionalised the principles of war in doctrine.

The aim of this paper is to test the validity of two rationalist claims to answer the puzzle just described. In simple terms, one either adopts the principles of war because they will assist in defeating the enemy or one adopts the principles of war because they can explain the outcome of battle and war, and therefore, by providing you with a superior analytical tool, indirectly help you to defeat the enemy. We suggest that these two propositions can be summed up as adopting the principles of war for practical or theoretical purposes. From a practitioner’s point of view, it is entirely understandable to attempt to identify guidelines for winning a war. It is equally understandable that the scientific search for ways to determine the outcome of war begins by attempting to identify variables that could help to explain victory and defeat.

We will argue that neither one of these propositions can be upheld. There is no clear-cut evidence to suggest that conscious efforts to follow and implement the principles of war in planning or conduct of military operations lead to victory. Neither is there evidence to suggest that any form of large-N or comparative research has been produced to sustain the claim that

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the principles of war can actually explain the outcome of wars or battles. This leaves us somewhat more puzzled of the remarkable success of the principles of war in terms of how they have been institutionalised. It also leaves us with the somewhat troubling impression that military force is wielded in ways not based on scientific evidence, but rather anecdotal evidence. The null-result also implies that either some other rationalist frameworks will be more successful in explaining the spread and doctrinal adoption of the principles or one have to use constructivist theories to make sense of this development. One could, for example, contemplate how the spread and development of a professionalised corps of staff officers, and their sense of identity, have influenced the adoption of the principles in doctrine. Furthermore, one might ponder to what extent there is an asymmetrical relationship in the spread of the principles insofar as small powers adopt the principles after the major powers have done so to signify belonging and – within alliances – for purposes of interoperability.

The paper proceeds as follows. In part one, we introduce the principles of war and account for some of the conceptual debates surrounding the principles. How should the principles of war be interpreted? Within which frameworks do they occur? For natural reasons, this section will primarily reflect the debate between those who have already accepted the existence of the principles. Thereafter, we introduce a number of principles, their inherent logic and their mutual relationships. It is important to point out here that the primary purpose of this section is not to attempt to select the most important and most applicable principles or to establish a ranking order among them, but to illustrate how the principles of war are commonly used in textbooks and doctrines.

In part two, we present a three-part discussion elaborating on the process of how the principles were institutionalised, as well as evaluating the dual propositions of theory and practice. Firstly we take an historical approach, describing the development of the principles into how we interpret them up to the present time. This section will primarily illustrate the debate about the existence of the principles from an historical perspective. Following this we introduce two analytical sections that discuss the principles of war as scientific theory and as military practice.

Part I - The principles of war: An overview

1) Debating the principles of war

The purpose of creating the principles of war lies in the aim to accumulate experience and knowledge for the education of future military generations. Each soldier or officer should not need to begin from ‘scratch’, but have a certain modicum of established knowledge to work from. In a similar manner, science seeks to gradually build knowledge so that the wheel need not be reinvented again and again. There is no great debate about these objectives, but that is where the intellectual unanimity ends. Several military theoretical problem areas converge
around the principles of war, which is one of the reasons why they are so contested. What is perhaps most obvious is that the debate regarding whether war can be regarded as art or science is brought to a head in the discussion on the principles of war. Several aspects of how the principles should be interpreted have provoked debate and these debates have mainly been conducted between those who have already accepted the existence of the principles.

Firstly, opinion is divided on the nature of the principles. Throughout history, the principles of war have often been interpreted as 'rules and regulations', as a set of guidelines or as variables for explaining the outcome of war, i.e., an instrument of analysis for studying military history. These three notions are closely related but there are slight differences in meaning. If we interpret the principles as rules and regulations, they should also be followed by practitioners. Interpreting the principles as rules and regulations also means that they can be interpreted as variables for explaining the outcome of war. It would seem reasonable for the principles to include both these elements since they, as rules and regulations, probably reflect a causal relationship. Well-known American naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914), for example, was of the opinion that, historically, naval battles are won by those who adhere to the principles of war.\(^3\) It would, of course, be odd if someone advocated that generals should follow rules and regulations that do not lead to victory. If they are to be interpreted as variables, they should be measurable, precise and logically consistent. If, on the other hand, we interpret them as slightly more flexible guidelines – which is the most common interpretation – deviations from the principles can be acceptable and even encouraged by some under certain circumstances. Swedish historian Alf W. Johansson seems to adopt the attitude that the principles are 'guidelines' as he believes that the principles cannot be regarded as scientific laws based on military historical experience, but as 'a number of aspects of warfare'.\(^4\) Using this approach, they could be regarded as variables or concepts that can be used to categorise military experience, and abstractions from it, but not as regular theories, as they do not explain the connection between different phenomena. The art of war will then be a matter of effectively combining these principles, but also knowing when the principles can be ignored in a real-life situation.

Secondly, opinion is divided regarding to which of the levels of warfare the principles apply. On the one hand, there are those who believe that the principles of war are universal regardless of level. Paul Katz believes, for example, that they are ‘a collection of concise rules for warfare’ that ‘are independent of time, place and situation’, which is why the principles are relevant for all ‘battle leaders, from the low-ranking officer to the general.’\(^5\) In a similar manner, US Army Colonel John M. Collins is of the opinion that the principles of war apply to both the strategic and tactical level but that they are primarily applicable at the operational

level. On the other hand, Fuller put together one list of principles for the strategic level and another for the tactical level (his tactical principles were demoralisation, endurance and shock), which suggests that he believed that it was essential to adapt the principles, their content and their form according to levels of war. How we relate to this question influences, in turn, the scope of the theoretical evidence the principles contain. For example, it is obviously not the case that strategic surprise necessarily involves tactical surprise and tactical flexibility does not necessarily lead to strategic flexibility. If it is possible to adapt the principles of war to different levels, this raises the question on which level they are most preferably used. For example, what type of surprise, tactical or strategic, is it that decides the outcome of war?

Thirdly, there is a debate regarding what types of war the principles apply to. Some people believe that the principles are the same, regardless of the type of conflict, while others believe that there are different sets of principles for different kinds of conflict. This question again refers to the scope of the theory. If the principles are only valid in certain types of war, their scope will obviously decrease. Russell Glenn points out, for instance, that the US Army has different sets of principles depending on whether they are dealing with regular warfare or military operations other than war. In the latter, “legitimacy” is included instead of “concentration of force”, “restraint” instead of “economy of force” and “perseverance” rather than “offence.” British military thinker Charles E. Callwell (1859–1928) was also of the opinion, during the height of the British period of colonialism, that so-called “small wars” had a unique set of principles. He argued, for example, that combat was more important than manoeuvre and – which was controversial at the end of the eighteenth century – that concentration of force was not essential for success when it came to small wars. John Keegan, for his part, has asserted that the principles of war embrace the aspiration for unconditional surrender, which, according to him, meant that they were not suitable in the nuclear age or for thinking in regard to wars between states with nuclear weapons.

Fourthly, it is often asserted that the principles are universal for warfare in all types of arenas. But this is also contested. Jomini believed that the ‘fundamental principles upon which rest all good combinations of war have always existed’ and that they ‘are unchangeable; they are independent of the arms employed, of times, and of places.’ However, Mahan, otherwise a great admirer of Jomini, formulated his principles in a different way. He included, for example, the setting up of logistics bases, the maintenance of sea lines of communication and the disruption of commercial shipping, in addition to Jomini’s principles of objectives and

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concentration of force.\textsuperscript{12} Swedish military historian Marco Smedberg is of the opinion that air warfare has different principles from ground warfare.\textsuperscript{13} For a period, the US Air Force had a different set of principles from the Army, in which they included ‘timing and tempo’, ‘logistics’ and ‘cohesion’.\textsuperscript{14} The last two examples indicate that it is not entirely obvious that the principles are valid for all forms of warfare at sea, in the air and on the ground without further definition and enquiry.

Fifthly, opinions are divided on what exactly the principles should be able to explain, i.e., the dependent variable. Several different alternatives are possible. Are the principles valid for individual battles, for campaigns, for warfare and war, for all military activity, or are they a path to success for all human activity in a general sense? Mahan, for example, was of the opinion that the principles were valid as a path to success in everything from shipbuilding, the composition of fleets, to planning and implementing naval operations.\textsuperscript{15} For his part, Fuller argued in 1920 that the principles (at the time a list of eight) were ‘eternal, universal and fundamental’ and applied to everything from boxing matches to battle.\textsuperscript{16} Without a more detailed definition of exactly what the principles are intended to explain, it is by no means obvious that they can be used as an explanation.

Sixthly, there is extensive debate regarding how many principles there are and what they are, which is illustrated in Table 1 below.\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{table}[h]
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\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Jomini (1816)} & \textbf{Foch (1906)} & \textbf{Fuller (1923)} & \textbf{Montgomery (1945)} & \textbf{Savkin (1953)} & \textbf{Mao (1954)} \\
\hline
Concentration of force against a decisive point. & Economy of force & Objectives & Air power & Mobility & Objectives \\
Freedom of action & Concentration of force & Leadership & Tempo & Local concentration of force & \\
Freedom to deploy forces & Economy of force & Initiative & Concentration of force & Destruction & \\
Security, etc. & Decisiveness & Morale & Surprise & Mobile combat & \\
Surprise & Economy of force & Surprise & Initiative & Offensive & \\
Endurance & Concentration of force & Concentration of force & Recovery & Surprise & \\
Mobility & Initiative & Coordination & Objectives & Continual attack & \\
Offensive & Simplicity & Coordination & Coordination & Autonomy & \\
Security & & & & Uniform leadership & \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Comparison of Principles in Different Theorists and Practitioners}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{12} Mahan, ‘The Influence of Sea Power Upon History’, p. 63.
\textsuperscript{14} Glenn, ‘No More Principles of War?’, p. 52.
\textsuperscript{15} Referred to in Alger, \textit{The Quest for Victory}, p. 91.
\textsuperscript{16} Quoted in ibid., p. 123.
\textsuperscript{17} Table 1 has been compiled from similar previous attempts. See Christopher Bellamy, \textit{The Evolution of Modern Land Warfare: Theory and Practice} (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 14, but, above all, Alger’s chronological appendix of different theorists’ and practitioners’ principles in Alger, \textit{The Quest for Victory}, pp. 193–270.
Content and the number of principles vary not only from author to author and from doctrine to doctrine, but there is also a certain development in the thinking of individual theorists. The number of principles has varied from Jomini’s original sole principle to Wilhelm Friedrich von Rüstow’s 27 principles (1821–1878). Within this interval we can, for example, find British Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery (1887-1976) and Vasilii Savkin, who mention seven (and four ‘laws’), Mao Zedong mentions ten, Fuller decided, after a great deal of contemplation, on nine fundamental principles, and the French General Ferdinand Foch (1851–1929) named four principles, but kept the door open for there being more when he concluded his list with a famous ‘etc’. In his initial formulation in 1816, Jomini believed that concentration of force against the decisive point was the only principle, but that there were up to twelve different ways of achieving this concentration of force. He gradually revised his view and varied the number of methods for achieving it. Some of these methods were later developed into being regarded as principles by their own efforts, e.g., manoeuvre and surprise.18 Other theorists also developed their view. Liddell Hart initially adhered to Jomini’s original idea and applied only one principle, ‘concentration of strength against weakness’ (although he did not, strictly speaking, term it ‘principle’, but instead ‘practical guides’). He subsequently developed eight maxims in the form of ‘do’s and don’ts’.19

The number, content and form of the principles also vary in doctrines, something that is clear from Table 2 below.20

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<td>Objectives</td>
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<td>Offensive</td>
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<td>Surprise</td>
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<td>Economy of force</td>
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<td>Concentration of force</td>
<td>Concentration of force</td>
<td>Freedom of action</td>
<td>Uniform leadership</td>
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<td>Economy of force</td>
<td>Economy of force</td>
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<td>Simplicity</td>
<td>Mobility, tempo and initiative</td>
<td>Mobility, initiative &amp; flexibility</td>
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<td>Mobility</td>
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<td>Uniform</td>
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20 The table has been compiled from American, British, French and German doctrines and also Alger’s chronological appendix of various theorists’ and practitioners’ principles. Alger, The Quest for Victory, pp. 193–270. It is important to note that the years in the table indicate when the principles of war were adopted in the doctrines for the first time. This means that the compilation, which shows current numbers and principles, does not necessarily concur with the original lists. It is also worth noting that the Soviet Union had a list of overriding principles that paid homage to Marxist-Leninist features, which did not always have anything to do with warfare. In the table, only those with a direct link to war are named. The principles or texts that were similar to principles also existed within the American armed forces in the 1910s, but in a distinctly tactical form and dealt, for example, with the imperative of cavalry combat. In a similar manner, there were principles for command or combat in fortified terrain in both Germany and France during the First World War.
### Table 2. The principles of war according to the Great Powers' army doctrines or joint ones for the different branches of the armed forces.

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<tr>
<th>leadership</th>
<th>Security</th>
<th>Surprise</th>
<th>Simplicity</th>
<th>Following-up</th>
<th>Security</th>
<th>Surprise</th>
<th>Morale</th>
<th>Freedom of action</th>
<th>Political mobilisation</th>
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What is perhaps important is not which principles the different doctrines deal with, but that they vary, which suggests that the principles of war – even in their institutionalised form – are not one theory, but several. The second thing that emerges from the table is that the principles of war were institutionalised at roughly the same time in Western Europe, with the exception of Germany, in the aftermath of the First World War and during the interwar period. This shows that the application of the principles in a doctrine context is primarily a modern phenomenon.

**ii) Interpreting the principles of war: Logic and mutual relationship**

As previously mentioned, the number of principles varies from author to author, which also applies to the mutual relationships and their definitions. In this section, we intend to describe a number of principles that are commonly referred to. It is, however, important to point out that the primary aim is not to attempt to select the most important and most useable principles or to establish a ranking among them, but to analyse the principles' inner logic and their mutual relationship to each other. Who has presented the principles, what the principles are and how they have been interpreted are, therefore, of limited importance. What is important, however, is the logical, methodological and knowledge basis the principles rest on.

In order to illustrate our reasoning, we have chosen twelve principles with the accompanying exemplifications presented by Collins in his book, *Military Strategy – Principles, Practices, and Historical Perspectives*. It should be noted that the different principles are, according to Collins, intended to work at all levels of warfare, but, primarily, at the operational level.

**The principle of purpose:** Military endeavours should be aimed at clear and achievable objectives. These should, in turn, be based on established security interests, which form the basis for all strategic concepts and military operations. The objectives should be logically consistent, clearly worded and concentrated optimally on the enemy's centres of gravity. Plans and operations at each level – strategic, operational and tactical – should help achieve the overall objective without ending up in opposition to each other. Objectives established at the beginning of a military operation often tend to become blurred and unclear as the operation progresses and unexpected events occur. An experienced decision-maker or commander should regularly review his objectives, Collins asserts, so as to assure himself that they are

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tenable and rationally based. During the Korean War, he argues, the objective of the military operations was changed four times during the first year, where the aim was initially to withstand the North Korean attack (June–August 1950), then to unite North and South Korea (September–November 1950), then to survive the Chinese counter-attack (December 1950–March 1951), and finally to aim for a status quo and a truce (April 1951–July 1953). This event is not unique in military history, but shows the difficulty of clarifying and adhering to a consistent objective.\(^{22}\) In peacemaking operations too, *mission creep*, i.e., where the objective of the operation changes as the operation develops, is regarded with some scepticism and as a recipe for disaster.\(^{23}\)

The principle of initiative: Offensive action makes it possible to act rather than react to the enemy at a time and place decided by one’s own side. Collins believes that this is the best way of taking and maintaining the initiative, while withholding it from the enemy. Success with this principle provides increased room for manoeuvre, which will inspire your own troops and demoralise the enemy, as well as creating opportunities for exploiting the enemy’s vulnerabilities. The party holding the initiative will also control the course of events on the battlefield. The German attack westwards in May 1940 could be said to be an example of a military operation where one party, in this case, Nazi Germany, succeeded, right from the outset, in taking the initiative and retaining it during the entire campaign. In this way, French troops and their allies had difficulties launching effective counterattacks. Every skilful strategist, Collins argues, will only adopt a defensive position and remain passive until the opportunity arises to act and take the initiative. The Russian/Soviet retreats eastwards in 1812 and 1941-42 had, according to him, the aim of, among other things, gaining time until sufficient forces had been assembled to begin well-aimed counterattacks, which is also what happened outside Moscow in the winter of 1812-13 and at Stalingrad in the winter of 1942-43.\(^{24}\)

The principle of flexibility: Maintaining flexibility and freedom of action is often highly valued in the execution of military operations. Collins asserts that to base one’s planning on definite and certain factors is perhaps the most serious of all military mistakes as no one can foresee how different events will unfold in the long run. Political and military objectives can change totally unexpectedly, both one’s own and the opponent’s. The plans that have been drawn up and the resources produced may prove insufficient in the light of the developing events. That is why good margins and alternative plans, that have already been developed, are necessary in order to maintain one’s own freedom of action in the event of the opponent sabotaging or rendering impossible the execution of the original plan. Collins believes that the best way of avoiding these risks is to create a spectrum of both short- and long-term strate-

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\(^{22}\) Collins, *Military Strategy*, p. 82.


\(^{24}\) Collins, *Military Strategy*, p. 82.
gies. A general who often provided evidence of the value of the principle of flexibility was the German General Erwin Rommel, who, in North Africa in 1941, despite being numerically inferior, succeeded in forcing back and, in many cases, defeating his British opponents through the flexible use of the weapons systems and units available.

The principle of concentration: One of the most important principles in war and warfare is the ability to concentrate one’s resources in time and space and create local superiority in relation to the opponent. Sometimes this is expressed as the principle of concentration or concentration of force. Collins states that this applies to all levels of warfare, and in all contexts. Military forces that are inferior in terms of quantity and even quality may gain the upper hand against an opponent who is, overall, superior, if they are able to concentrate their resources and the opponent fails, in turn, to do this. Already the Chinese military theorist Sun Tzu (500 B.C.) included in his book, Art of War, an argument about the value of concentration, when he started that, if the enemy prepares himself in all areas, he will be weak overall. Jomini was also careful to point out the value of this principle and believed that the entire art of war could be reduced to the ability to concentrate one’s own forces against the decisive point. According to Jomini, based on this reasoning, it was important to take and retain the initiative. The Soviet counterattacks north and south of Stalingrad in November 1942 are, according to Smedberg, good examples of concentrating existing resources against an opponent whose troops have become divided and spread out. Today, this principle has been much debated in certain quarters, as there are some who believe that the development of new technology has moved towards focusing on effects, instead of the older way of thinking, ‘git thar furst, with the mostest’, as the general of the Southern States, Nathan Bedford Forrest, put it.

The principle of economy: Each state or state-like entity, including Great Powers, has limited resources, which means that the concentration of force in time and space require economy of resources in other places. The limited means that are available lead to the need to prioritise so that operations only receive as large a proportion of the available resources as the task requires. Here, we can also speak of an economy of force. This principle is thus closely connected with the notion that the use of military force is calculated and rational. The principle of economy is, as we can see, closely associated with the principle of concentration. The principle of economy can be illustrated by the US and British decision, during the Second

25 Collins, Military Strategy, p. 82.
27 Collins, Military Strategy, pp. 82-83.
30 The example has been taken from Smedberg, Om stridens grunder, pp. 166–167.
World War, to first focus their efforts on defeating Nazi Germany and, not until then, defeating Japan. An example of where neglecting to stick to this principle resulted in an expensive mistake was Hitler’s attempt to wage war on several fronts – in the East against the Soviet Union, in the South-East against Yugoslavia and Greece, in the South against the British in North Africa – at the same time as they had not yet concluded the war against Great Britain in the West. This proved to be a crucial mistake, which finally led to his ruin. Collins is of the opinion that any sensible strategist would be wise not to take on several powerful enemies at the same time, as this makes it difficult to concentrate personnel and resources.  

The principle of maneuver: Being mobile on the battlefield and flexible in one’s strategic thinking will contribute towards the ability to be able to quickly switch from one direction of attack to another or from a certain pattern of behaviour to another. The principle of mobility will also contribute towards the capacity to concentrate one’s resources against the decisive point. Collins maintains that strategically important attacks on the flanks, envelopments on the ground and from the air, relocating quickly and infiltration of the enemy’s lines with a view to avoiding the enemy’s positions of strength, are preferable to carrying out direct frontal attacks. Any skilful strategist, he continues, should, in the spirit of Liddell Hart, strive to maintain power and speed in physical and intellectual behaviour and not allow the opponent to regain their balance. One should, moreover, target the opponent’s weaknesses [lines of least resistance] right up until the ultimate objective has been achieved. This reasoning can be compared with the one presented by the French military theorist and admiral Raoul Castex (1878–1968), who believed that mobility had the primary purpose of acquiring a favourable position in relation to the main objective. This objective may, unlike in the case of Liddell Hart, be both the opponent’s strong and weak point. The German General Heinz Guderian’s rapid manoeuvres and mobile operations during the campaign in the West in May-June 1940 is a good example of the advantages the principle of mobility may result in. Another more modern example is the US-led alliance’s ground war against Iraq in February 1991 and March-April 2003.

The principle of surprise: Surprise is normally a crucial principle in all warfare. It is, however, no guarantee to success, although it undoubtedly increases the prospects of a successful result. A successful application of surprise can create effects and results that greatly exceed the amount of effort and materiel used. An enemy who is shocked, distracted, ending up in a state of imbalance or being pressed for time, will also lose the initiative, which is one of the objectives of surprise. An example of a successful surprise at a strategic and operational level is the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Here, Japanese forces succeeded in deceiving and misleading the American intelligence services, who were not able to discover the Japanese Navy’s concentration of naval forces and manoeuvres in the waters

32 Collins, Military Strategy, p. 83.
33 Ibid.
close to the American Pacific fleet’s main base. The effect was, as we all know, dramatic. Another similar example is al Qaeda’s attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in September 2001. There seems to have been limited advance warning in this case, and, to the extent that it existed, it did not result in any marked attempts to counteract the effects of the planned action. In a similar way, surprise also fulfils an important function at the tactical level.  

*The principle of security:* Just like a boxer in the ring, states and their armed forces must constantly protect themselves. Security is a means of countering surprise and serves to maintain the state’s power and influence. It also serves to reduce the risk of foreign and domestic enemies spoiling one’s own strategic and operational plans. It is important for states to protect their populations, infrastructure, resources and armed forces. It is also crucial to maintain freedom of action, reducing vulnerability and the risks a country may be exposed to. Ways of achieving this are finding out, through intelligence activity, the enemy’s capacity and intentions with a view to countering the opponent’s means of surprise. This also includes counterespionage and attempts to reveal enemy subversion. Armed combat requires the protection of flanks, lines of supply and one’s own bases. A certain safety margin in the operations plans and the amount of resources is important for managing unforeseen risks and ensuring success.  

*The principle of simplicity:* In a military context, it is regarded as a virtue to strive for simplicity and thereby avoid too complicated plans and operations that become even more complicated when they ultimately face reality. Clear and simple plans also reduce the risk of misunderstandings and confusion. In his famous work, *On War,* Clausewitz described the friction that characterises all warfare and he compared this with movement in a resistant element, such as water, where even the most natural and simple movements are difficult. Just as there is a need for safety margins in military operations, simplicity is therefore required to counter friction. According to Collins, an good example of a simple order is the one issued to General Eisenhower in February 1944 by the US-UK joint military command. Here it was simply stated that he was to go ashore on the European continent and, in consultation with the allies, carry out operations directed at the heart of Germany and destroying the German armed forces. According to Collins, this order applied right up to the very end of the war.  

*The principle of unity:* This principle is regarded as of great importance because concerted and coordinated actions have better chances of succeeding. Collins is of the opinion that a coordinated leadership ‘are better able to assign responsibility, promulgate policies, establish procedures, issue guidance, approve plans, set standards, supervise implementation, and settle disputes.’ One example of a lack of coordination is the American warfare in Vietnam where the commander for the Pacific region, with its headquarters in Hawaii, was

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responsible for air warfare, another commander responsible for ground operations and diplomacy was dealt with by the American Ambassador in Saigon. At the same time, almost forty different organisations on the South Vietnamese side were involved in reform work in the rural areas. This lack of coordination reduced the opportunities for the US and its allies to wage war effectively in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{40}

The principle of morale: The importance of morale for effective warfare has been stressed throughout the ages by generals and military thinkers alike. Napoleon, for example, believed that morale was three times as important as material strength. For his part, Clausewitz stated that ‘moral elements are among the most important in war’ and that war consisted equally of physical and moral causes and effects.\textsuperscript{41} Good morale is often considered important for countering the effects of the frictions that arise in war, but also the danger and physical pressures that soldiers and commanders are subjected to. Combat morale may be influenced by many things, including the perceived legitimacy of the actual war, recovery time, the feasibility of the mission, the effectiveness of the equipment in relation to the opponent, the quality of the leadership and the level of training and exercise. The principle that many military forces have of never leaving a wounded soldier on the battlefield, or devoting a great deal of energy to saving pilots who have been shot down over enemy’s territory are fine examples of how good morale is preserved in military organisations. Another example of the importance of good morale among the civilian population is the British people’s resistance to the German bombings in the summer of 1940.

The principle of time: Time is a factor that affects almost all activities in war. A wise strategist or commander will, therefore, organise his activities in such a manner that the time factor favours his own side and ensures that the opponent ends up pressed for time. The feel for timing, i.e., knowing when something should be done or a decision made, is also related to this principle.\textsuperscript{42} A modern day example in which the time factor has been of critical importance is the Kosovo War. Here the sustained and, on the part of the US and its allies, relatively safe bombing of Serbia, led Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic to the conclusion that time was against him and that a truce was the best way of avoiding further losses. Time may also be an important factor at an operational level when a counterattack is to be launched at exactly the right time for greatest possible effect.

Part II – The principles of war as theory or practice

The above discussion showed, among other things, that the principles are disputed and may vary based on their form, content and number. From this, we will now turn to a more analytical section, in which we will tackle the question of whether we should interpret the

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{42} Collins, Military Strategy, p. 85.
principles as theory or practice in greater detail and we will begin in reverse order. But first we present a history of ideas in which we trace the intellectual roots of the principles of war from Sun Tzu onwards.

i) The principles of war: The history of ideas

As shown above, presenting the principles of war as a concise list of concepts is a modern phenomenon. It could reasonably be said that the principles of war, as we interpret and present them today, did not begin to emerge until during the 1920s. The principles – and the questions they are an expression of – can, nonetheless, be traced further back through the history of military thought.

The first person to express something similar to the principles of war is probably Sun Tzu, who stressed, for instance, the importance of surprise and planning in victory and defeat. We should, however, note that Sun Tzu also argued that there are no fixed rules for success in warfare. The latter suggests that Sun Tzu should be regarded as a predecessor of those who argue that the circumstances of war vary so much that it is not possible to establish any timeless principles. During ancient history and in Europe of the Middle Ages, thinking focused on identifying guidelines for maintaining discipline, organisation, fortification and administration. This was a natural thing to do as, first and foremost, logistical challenges in medieval warfare often led to armies plundering rural areas, both to keep their own army on its feet and also to make logistics more difficult for the opponent. The warring parties also attempted to capture or demand ransoms from towns with a view to provide for the various armies. The principal way of protecting oneself from being plundered was improving one’s own fortifications.

The scientific revolution and the Enlightenment not only influenced society, but also military thinking. It is actually here that the principles, as they are interpreted today, have their origins. By representing war, like other phenomena, as scientific, the foundation was laid for the belief that there were also principles that governed war. Furthermore, the origin and wording of the principles were influenced by the first military schools of learning being established during this period, at which the study of warfare took place with a view to training future generations of officers. Within the framework of this activity, alongside more technical subjects and artillery, the need to study military history and learn lessons through the systematic study of war rapidly developed. This meant, by extension, more books about the art of war being written by teachers at the colleges than by generals. This favoured the notion that it was possible to uncover timeless principles of war, as teachers were generally more receptive than generals to scientific ideals. In this manner, the foundation for the search of

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43 The section on the history of ideas is mainly based on Alger, The Quest for Victory, which is the only systematic overview of the principles' history of ideas.
44 Sun Tzu, Art of War, pp. 167-169.
principles was laid – fundamental truths expressed as guidelines for action. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, in France in particular – through, among others, Antoine Manassés de Pas (1648–1711), Jean Charles (1669–1752) and Maurice de Saxe (1696–1750), textbooks on the art of war emerged, expressing lessons that were believed to be timeless. The notion of principles of war thereby begins to be established, although their number, form and content had not yet been defined.  

In contrast to what is sometimes asserted, Jomini was not the first to write down a list of the principles of war. Actually, it was the Marquis de Silva in France and Henry Lloyd (1718–1783) in Great Britain, at the end of the eighteenth century, who pioneered with their numbered lists of principles. Despite this, Jomini made a big contribution to the principles of war through his strong argument at the beginning of his career that there were principles of war and that they were immutable and universal. Clausewitz also presented lessons in the form of principles but was, at the same time, very careful to point out that they were intended as aids for personal reflection prior to fighting breaking out, rather than guidelines for how war should be conducted. Jomini appears as well to have been increasingly caught in two minds with regard to the principles, since he believed that the commander utilising them needed talent as well. According to Jomini, the core problem was that ‘nothing is better calculated to kill natural genius and to cause error to triumph, than those pedantic theories, based upon the false idea that war is a positive science, all the operations of which can be reduced to infallible calculations.’  

Even today the debate between advocates and critics of the existence and usefulness of the principles pertains to these two positions – war as a science and thereby based on general principles and war as an art, requiring talent and skill.

In the nineteenth century, Jomini’s teachings gradually served as guidance in the military schools of learning among the Great Powers in Europe, with the possible exception of Germany. In the nineteenth century in France, a great deal of thinking was devoted to identifying the right principles. In Great Britain and the USA, a lengthy debate was started regarding whether principles existed and, if so, what they were. Patrick Leonard MacDougall (1819–1894), Commandant of the Royal Military College and a great admirer of Jomini’s ideas, virtually copied these principles for use in the British Army. McDougall’s teachings were, however, always disputed and, among others, Wellington, who finally proved to be Napoleon’s match, considered military training to be ‘nonsense’. In the USA, Jomini’s ideas appeared to have been verified through the North’s victory over the South in the Civil War (1861–1865). The South’s able generals, Robert E. Lee, Nathan Bedford Forest and Thomas ‘Stonewall’ Jackson, had, of course, lost the war against the North’s greater resources. Also in Prussia there were a few advocates of general principles of war – e.g., Rüstow, who identified 27 ‘fundamental laws’ for warfare – but the mainstream of Prussian military thinkers consisted of
critics. Georg Heinrich von Berenhorst (1733–1814), Clausewitz and, later, Moltke the Elder rejected the ideas and, instead, stressed that each situation was unique, which is why it was not possible to establish any general principles. Berenhorst was, above all, critical of the principles being surrounded by exceptions; ‘What is the use of rules when one is covered up to one’s ears with exceptions?’, he asked rhetorically at the beginning of the nineteenth century.\(^{49}\) Moltke went further and claimed that: ‘In War, as in the arts, there is no general standard, in neither can talent be replaced by a rule.’\(^{50}\)

Around the turn of the century, there was a fierce debate in both the USA and Europe. Two positions had gradually formed, inspired by Clausewitz and Jomini: either all rules and principles were rejected or else they were embraced whole-heartedly. Regardless of the approach that dominated, each individual was forced to adopt a position on the question of the existence of the principles. The principles had not yet been officially codified in the doctrines or regulations of the Great Powers by the start of the First World War, although the *British Field Service Regulations* from 1909 mentioned the existence of similar principles, but without naming any of them.\(^{51}\)

With the First World War, this changed however. Firstly, the war created the need to train greater numbers of soldiers and officers than ever before, which required finding a few simple rules according to which war was to be conducted. Secondly, the principles of war, as we know them today, were created by Fuller, who Alger believes is ‘unquestionably the most influential contributor to the modern concept of “principles of war” in the twentieth century.’\(^{52}\) Fuller’s first list of eight principles in an article from 1916 mainly emerged as the result of his combat experience on the Western Front. When he later began to study military history more systematically, he developed his argument to include nine principles in 1923. Fuller succeeded, more than any of his contemporaries, in capturing the principles and, at least initially, making his voice heard in the British defence establishment.

During the interwar period, the principles of war were institutionalised and codified in the Great Powers’ doctrines and regulations. They were still contested, however. In what would later become the US Army’s doctrine/regulations, *FM-100 Operations*, the principles were, for example, included in 1921, they disappeared in 1928, returned in 1939, disappeared again in 1941, returned in 1949 and once again disappeared in 1976, to finally be returned in 1978. In a similar manner, some of Fuller’s original ideas were codified in the British Army’s *Field Service Regulations* in 1920, only to disappear in the 1935-version and return, thanks to Montgomery, after the Second World War. In France, the principles were initially rejected by the group working on doctrines, set up after the war and led by Petain (and after Foch had left the army). It was not until 1936 that the principles made their entry into French Army doctrine.

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50 Quoted in Alger, *The Quest for Victory*, p. 57.
51 Ibid., p. 102.
52 Ibid., p. 106.
In Germany, they resisted the temptation to follow the victorious powers from the First World War and introduce principles. Despite this, the emergence of the principles of war was eagerly discussed in interwar Germany. In the newly-formed Soviet Union, the principles were also rejected after a heated debate, mainly between Mikhail Frunze (1885–1925) and Leon Trotsky (1879–1940), where the latter asserted that the principles were a ‘bourgeois’ invention and that there were no eternal laws in warfare.

At the outset of the Second World War, the principles of war were more or less established and much discussed in military theory, although they had by and large disappeared from the Great Powers’ doctrines. During the war, for understandable reasons, more time was devoted to conducting operations than philosophising about war, which is why the debate on the principles of war was rather modest, with the exception of Montgomery, who distributed a text on his view of the principles of war to his subordinates.

After the war, the principles consequently returned in the British doctrines, although their existence was also debated from then on. For example, the military historian John Keegan argued that, basically, they were not valid since no systematic testing had been carried out. In the USA, the principles also remained controversial. Peter Paret, the well-known Clausewitz expert, believed, for example, that the principles of war were nothing but ‘a catalogue of commonplaces that ... has served generations of soldiers as an excuse not to think things through themselves.’ Despite often bitter criticism, the principles have remained in American doctrines. After the war, the concept from 1936 was developed in France and, in 1973, three principles and five ‘laws’ were included, which were a means of adhering to the principles. In Germany, and later West Germany, the principles were still dismissed in a doctrine context, despite the regular debate after the war. It was not until the Truppenführung of 1962 that a list of 35 principles for conventional warfare and nuclear warfare were included, but, even then, it was strongly pointed out that they were not generally valid. These warnings also returned in the 1973-version, where the tactical principles resembled those used in Great Britain and the USA, although there were still a significantly greater number of them. Here it was stated that war cannot be reduced to a formula and that success is, instead, the result of the commander’s critical thinking and also free and creative action within the confines of his mission. It was not until the 1990s that the number of principles was limited in German doctrines and their collection resembled the few principles of the other countries. In the Soviet Union, the principles were not codified until 1942, following an order from Stalin, although they had previously been used in practice. During the reform-period that followed Stalin’s death in 1953, ‘the permanent operational factors’ gradually disappeared, to be replaced by the identical ‘principles of the art of war’, which could be traced back to Lenin. How then can

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55 Quoted in Alger, The Quest for Victory, p. 164.
56 Ibid., p. 154.
the principles of war be understood in terms of theory and practice? What are the problems with understanding them in this manner?

ii) The principles of war as practice

In his final instructions to the Prussian Crown Prince Frederick William (received 1812), in which Clausewitz briefly summarised warfare according to a few principles, he also warned of adhering too strictly to the principles: ‘The principles of the art of war are in themselves extremely simple and quite within the reach of sound common sense. ... Extensive knowledge and deep learning are by no means necessary, nor are extraordinary intellectual faculties.’

The words have also maintained their relevance in our time. Since then, the crucial question has actually been whether the learning of the principles of war, which are, in theory, simple and almost trivial, is of any practical use in the difficult art of waging war. Are the principles of war usable in practical action, or could using them even lead to problems?

Jomini and Clausewitz are two classical thinkers who have been sources of inspiration for the modern formulation of the principles of war. As stated previously, they are to some extent opposite poles in the question of whether the principles are usable in practice, although they otherwise have a lot that unites them. As the foremost interpreter of positive principles for how warfare should be conducted, Jomini believed that there were a number of fundamental principles in war that it would be dangerous to deviate from. Although Jomini was hesitant regarding his relationship to the principles, he asserted that their use had, throughout the course of history, led to success. Jomini believed that the maxims that could be interpreted from these principles were few in number and that, despite the fact that they sometimes changed character depending on the circumstances, they could generally serve as a compass for the commander in the execution of his difficult and complicated task of executing military operations. People with an innate talent, he believed, could certainly apply these principles as well as someone who had undertaken advanced studies in the subject, but a simple and explicit theory that focused on causal relationships but was free of exaggerated exactitude could also create this talent. The theory could thereby increase the general ability and self-confidence of a military commander. A few simple principles based on studies of military history with a great deal of space provided for natural talent was thus the best way of educating officers.

Clausewitz, on the other hand, was more critical of the possibility of being able to formulate positive principles for how warfare should be conducted. He believed that it was simply not possible to construct a model for the art of war that can serve as a scaffolding on which the commander can rely for support at any time. Whenever he has to fall back on his innate talent, he will find himself outside the model and in conflict with it; no matter how versatile the code, the

The factors that made a positive system consisting of the principles of war impossible were, according to Clausewitz, that war largely consisted of moral and psychological factors (such as courage, fear and ambition), which were not measurable; that war was characterised by human interaction, whose 'very nature' is 'bound to make it unpredictable'; and that war was characterised by great uncertainty where 'all action takes place, so to speak, in a kind of twilight', usually described as the fog of war. Clausewitz was of the opinion that these phenomena were insurmountable barriers for a theory formulated as a plan of action.

Instead of a positive doctrine, which the principles of war were an example of, he wanted attempts at theorisation to focus on the nature of war, as well as its objectives and means. Clausewitz believed that this theory would 'educate the mind of the future commander, or, more accurately, to guide him in his self-education, not to accompany him to the battlefield'. Thus, the principles of war were not the final product in an analysis of military history, but, on the contrary, a tool for the commander to understand and analyse the problems that the history of the war provided. Talent and genius would take care of the rest.

The different perspectives that Jomini and Clausewitz represent capture the fundamental structural problem that many people believe exist in the application of the principles of war. The more detailed (and, in theory, useable) the principles become, the greater the risk that the practical activity on the battlefield will become routine, dogmatic and, thereby, predictable. Predictable behaviour will soon come into conflict with the dynamic nature of war and lead, in those cases where there is no great superiority, to significant advantages for the opponent who can, thereby, adapt and optimise their own behaviour. Since war is ultimately a battle between opposing wills, and strategic thinking is directed not at a lifeless object but a living and intelligent organism, the latter tend to counter all attempts to create superiority or advantageous positions. As a result, the logical paradox will be that the most effective action is regularly the unexpected action, i.e., surprise. If there is an altogether too rigid specification of the principles of war, including the principle of surprise, the very deviations from these principles will often be the most unexpected thing that can be done. If, for example, an enemy expects a surprising move from us in every situation, deviating from the principle of surprise would actually be an example of surprise. This is an example of the paradoxes inherent in the use of the principles of war.

If the principles are, instead, kept vague and imprecise in order to avoid this trap, the result will be that they provide a minimum of guidance to a commander when the fog and chaos of war ensue. The fact that the principles of war in this vague form then become so

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59 Clausewitz, On War, p. 140.
60 Clausewitz, On War, pp. 137–140.
simple that they are virtually banal while actual war is so complex and chaotic could easily lead to the conclusion that the principles appear to have a relatively low value in helping the military commander to win wars. It is also arguable that the principles of war are knowledge at such an elementary level that the higher learning of the art of war is rather the ability to determine under which conditions one should deviate from the principles with a view to gaining advantages over the enemy. The conclusion to the argument above is, therefore, that the principles of war should never be used maximally, but, instead, optimally, i.e., in the most favourable manner in relation to the opponent and his behaviour. Using them maximally could, therefore, be almost as dangerous as using them in a minimalistic fashion. The commander is thus faced with a great dilemma.

Another practical problem with the use of the principles of war, if we assume that they are valid and will lead to victory in war, is that they mainly appear to work on an enemy who does not use them himself. This was asserted by von Berenhorst, who, despite considering Jomini’s principles mainly valid, felt that participants fighting in the same manner would cancel out each other and thereby neutralise the effect of the principles. Here, factors, such as the number of soldiers, their courage or lack of such qualities or pure chance, would be decisive, which, paradoxically enough, were the factors that the principles had originally tried to overcome and find a replacement for. Berenhorst believed that this was the case in ancient history when the Greeks and Romans had been successful with their principles of war against ‘barbarous peoples’, something that proved to be ineffective in internal conflicts where courage and talent tended to be decisive. He believed that this was also the case with Jomini’s principles, which were primarily based on experiences from the Napoleonic Wars. As long as Napoleon was their sole exponent, he achieved success, but the numerically superior enemies quickly learned his tricks, which ultimately meant him losing the upper hand.63 Certain battles on the Western Front during the First World War also appear to support this, as both parties focused their efforts against each other and there never was any decisive breakthrough.

How then is it possible that lots of prominent generals and military theorists persist in their arguments regarding the value of the principles of war despite the problems demonstrated by thinkers, such as Berenhorst and Clausewitz? The likely answer is probably that, firstly, the principles are easy to understand and, secondly, they fill a moral and organisational function as a source of inspiration and model for increasing the capacity for coordination and a joint vision in the military organisation. The use of the principles of war often takes the character of a self-fulfilling prophesy, where soldiers and their commanders believe they know that the principles produce results and they thereby act in a manner that leads to successful results – results that could equally be a result of chance, technical advantages or numerical superiority.

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63 Gat, A History of Military Thought, p. 157. See also the argument in Paret, Clausewitz and the State, p. 205n.
iii) The basic principles of war as theory

If the principles of war cannot be interpreted without difficulties in practical terms, should we then instead interpret the principles as variables for explaining the outcome of war? In order for the principles to be able to function as a theory, that includes causal relationships and thereby explains the outcome of war or warfare, it will be necessary for certain fundamental requirements to be fulfilled. On the one hand, there must be a definite connection between the principles – the independent variables – and the outcome of the war – the dependent variable. If there is no relationship between the assumed cause and effect we are attempting to explain, there will be good grounds for believing that the cause we have singled out is, quite simply, incorrect. On the other hand, the principles must contain a logical link to the outcome of war, since otherwise the connection may be random, even if it exists. For example, there are not many people today who still believe that the stork delivers babies, even if the arrival of the stork in the spring coincides with a great number of children being born. How well then can the principles meet these requirements?

A clear-cut answer to the question of whether there is a definite connection between adherence to the principles of war and the outcome of war can only be obtained through a systematic empirical investigation. Oddly enough – as John Keegan points out – this has not been done, which is why he draws the conclusion that the principles of war are perhaps not even valid. During the twentieth century at least, generations of officers have therefore been trained to place their trust in something that has not been systematically proved. The principles of war might perhaps just represent one of many views of how war should be conducted. Space and time do not allow us to carry out a systematic empirical investigation, but we can at least discuss certain pre-conditions for such an investigation.

In order to carry out an empirical test of this kind, it would be necessary for the principles to be measurable. This is where the prospective researcher encounters immediate problems regarding the principles of war. In the beginning of this paper, we gave an account of the rather extensive debate that exists on the nature, content, number and form of the principles. Based on this discussion, we can establish some problems with the conceptual precision of the principles. What, for example, does concentration of force mean? Is it concentration of force concerning effects, firepower, the number of soldiers, or the number of tanks – to name but a few alternatives? What should concentration of force be directed against? Jomini suggests 'the decisive point'. But what does the 'decisive point' consist of? Can we perhaps only know what the decisive point is after the battle has been concluded? Maybe concentration of force per se can create a decisive point no matter where it is deployed. In this case, it is hardly an actual decisive point that the commander needs to look for in his planning, or the theorist in his analysis, but something created by the battle itself. Without knowing

64 Keegan, 'On the Principles of War', p. 66.
exactly what type of concentration of force the principle refers to, it will obviously be difficult to test its empirical validity. Similar arguments can be presented regarding other principles, which have been observed by the American strategic thinker Bernard Brodie (1910–1978). He believed that the simplicity and alleged universality of the principles were either the result of ‘divine revelation or of a level of generality too broad to be operationally interesting.’ In their present state, the principles are quite simply so general that their universality cannot be tested, which makes them uninteresting as an explanation for the outcome of war.

Is it then even possible to argue a causal relationship between the principles of war and the outcome of war. In this case, we should be able to observe that adherence to the principles must be accompanied by victory and avoidance should lead to defeat. In order for the connection to be definite, it is also necessary for the opposite to apply, i.e., it should be impossible to achieve victory if we avoid using the principles. Furthermore, strict application of the principles cannot correlate with defeat. Both Keegan and Brodie discuss some examples of such circumstances. They argue that military history shows examples when one of the belligerents has split its own resources (the opposite of concentration of force and local superiority) and nevertheless achieved victory. In addition, there are examples of commanders who have followed the principles but still lost the battle. No doubt, however, there are also cases where the principles have been adhered to and victory been achieved. The fact that examples of the opposite occur means however that the connection between principles and outcome of war is not clear-cut and this means problems for the principles of war as theory.

The internal logic of the principles is also problematic. We have already mentioned that the principle of “purpose” (i.e. sticking to an objective) and ‘flexibility’ obviously cannot be said to be entirely compatible. In the same way, it is not very easy to reconcile the principle of ‘economy’ with ‘concentration of force’. In order for the principles of war to be able to function as an explanatory theory, it quite simply requires that the relationship between them is elucidated not just logically but also tested empirically. A similar problem, where the burden of proof lies with those who advocate the principles, is defining which of all the possible combinations of the principles will lead to success.

The fact that the causal relationship between adherence to the principles and victory does not appear clear-cut also means that it is necessary to consider alternative explanations. One of the principles’ fundamental qualities as an explanation is that they are based on how the general uses his units in combat. This is, however, not the only thing that influences the outcome of battles or campaigns. For example, the US-led coalition in 2003 would probably have defeated the Iraqi Army even if it had been employed differently. Somewhat in jest, we could assert that it does not really matter how much a platoon of infantry soldiers equipped with light fire arms concentrates its efforts when it meets a mechanised division with air

65 Brodie, Strategy in the Missile Age, p. 23.
support in open terrain. Resources, materiel and technology therefore also play an important part in the outcome of war or individual battles. For example, Napoleon commented, laconically, that ‘God is on the side of the biggest battalions’. In a similar manner, other factors, such as economics, influence how the armed forces are used and even what they have available for their own use. Apparently there are an abundance of rival explanations for the principles of war.

Finally, it is unwise to simply reject the principles of war as an explanation. Just because science cannot resolve a question does not mean that it definitely is of no value or can be regarded as nonsense. When acupuncture made its entry into Western medicine, some experts rejected the method as it was not considered credible, i.e. that the human body consisted of various energy fields of yin and yang. Other doctors, however, learned to use the method as it seemed to work. Once acupuncture could be associated with the stimulation of nerve fibres – and thereby was given an explanation that was satisfactory in the eyes of Western science – the method became more established and individual doctor needed not be worried about being regarded as a witch-doctor by their peers. The description above shows two things: the fact that science does not have answers to every question and that the scientific method finally succeeded in solving the problem. Consequently, a functioning tool exists for supporting or rejecting the principles.

Conclusions

The attempts to identify a small number of guidelines that commanders and armed forces should adhere to in order to win all types of war, and the scientific search for a single variable, are not unlike various endeavours to find a wonder-drug that cures every illness. The principles of war are a typical example of the dual nature of military theory: both the prescriptive statements regarding how war should be successfully waged and the explanatory aspirations of determining cause and effect. However, the spread and adaption of the principles of war in doctrines for these purposes cannot be sustained. By discussing the principles’ history of ideas, we have attempted to demonstrate how thinking about their existence has varied in time and space. Of course, this does not have to rule them out as timeless and universal. The fact that the content, form and number of the principles vary may well mean that there has been an increase in knowledge so that the principles that have gradually disappeared, were quite simply wrong. In order to be able to test this, however, extensive and systematic empirical studies are necessary. It is also clear from the discussion on the content of the principles and their explanatory value that the criticism that they are imprecise has some validity. However, it is perhaps this very lack of precision that has led to the enduring character of the principles of war. They are quite simply expressed in such a universal form that they can be used in any age
and in any fashion. Nevertheless, this quality means that there are great obstacles to testing their validity.

Through a discussion on how we should interpret the nature of the principles of war, as theory or practice, we have attempted to demonstrate that the debate over their existence can be traced back to a wider discussion with regard to whether war should be regarded as science or art. It has been shown in the paper that key military theorists, such as Sun Tzu, Jomini and Clausewitz, were in two minds about the principles and, thereby, about the question of whether war is an art or a science. They waver between these positions and thereby struggle with the same intellectual problems, although their solutions are ultimately different.

Regardless of whether we interpret the principles of war as theory or practice, applying them is a problem. For the practitioner, the problem is particularly one of balancing the principles against each other (as some of them are in direct opposition to each other) to figure out the ‘winning combination’ and avoid being predictable. Paradoxically, and in a logical sense, if we do not bother following the principles, we in fact follow the principles of surprise and flexibility. For the theorist, the problem is both that the importance of the principles is unclear, and that their explanatory power can be questioned. The connection between adherence to the principles and victory as well as ignoring the principles and defeat is far from clear-cut. There are also major challenges when defining and structuring the principles to make possible a systematic investigation.

Perhaps the solution to the practical problem is to never allow the principles to be anything other than our servants. If we bind ourselves to them, we may quickly become a prisoner of the principles. For the theoretical challenges, extensive work will be required on defining the principles so that they become measurable. Until then we cannot clearly investigate to what extent the connection between adherence to the principles and victory and defeat in war exists.