

Paper intended for the working group *war studies*

The radical unpredictability of war: Chance, uncertainty and emergence

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Abstract

Throughout history, leaders on the eve of war have rarely been able to foresee or even imagine the true outcome of the war to come. Wars fought over limited objectives have led to the fall of empires, revolutions, or engulfing world wars. In some cases, wars have frozen into decades-long stalemates or prolonged civil unrest, while in other cases, short wars have led to the birth of nations. While many aspects of war can be explained in terms of factors exogenous to war itself, such as the organisational and industrial bases of the belligerents, international law, or ideology and nationalism, war as a phenomenon also produces outcomes that cannot be reduced to its constituent elements. Understanding why the dynamics of war have proved so unpredictable is a central puzzle for war studies. The interactions of war create new realities.

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, it aims to review the role that chance and uncertainty play in theories of war from Clausewitz to contemporary theories. Second, the paper seeks to introduce a novel way of conceptualising chance and uncertainty that moves beyond the battlefield to the interplay between tactical events and the coherence of social collectives. The paper is structured around three arguments. First, by reviewing Clausewitz's perception of friction, the fog of war, chance, and the free spirit of decision-makers, it is argued that Clausewitz's approach remains the most coherent and continues to inform practitioners today. However, Clausewitz's approach primarily relates to events on the battlefield, whereas the political and social dimension of war is treated as an exogenous factor. Second, bargaining theory and historical sociology of war are two of the most ambitious, contemporary theoretical approaches to war that extend uncertainty and chance to the political and social dimensions. Third, the insights of Clausewitz on chance and the free spirit at the tactical level may fruitfully be transposed to the political and social dimensions, where the fear, uncertainty, and chance associated with war also create unexpected outcomes. To this end, the paper proposes a novel model based on complexity theory that puts emergence as a primary property of war.