

UNDERSTANDING CENTERS OF GRAVITY AND CRITICAL VULNERABILITIES

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Summary:

Despite progress in recent years, there is still confusion among DoD communities on both sides of the Atlantic about the concepts and definitions of centers of gravity and critical vulnerabilities. Although the current official concept of centers of gravity is not far afield of Clausewitz's original concept, the definition is (i.e., characteristics, capabilities and locations ...). We believe that this confusion is a product of an inadvertent misreading of the original Clausewitzian discussion of centers of gravity by Sir Michael Howard and Peter Paret in their popular 1976 edition/translation of Clausewitz's original *On War*.

Part 1 of this article shows that commonly-cited sentences and phrases relevant to our understanding of centers of gravity can be translated differently and more clearly than is the case in the Howard-Paret version of *On War*. These different translations are consistent with the *examples* of centers of gravity commonly depicted in official doctrinal manuals. The authors of this article contend that if the current official definition of center of gravity were brought into conformity with Clausewitz's original meaning of the term, the examples of centers of gravity already commonly cited would thereby be consistent with the definition. The proposed new definition of centers of gravity is:

physical or moral entities that are the primary components of physical or moral strength, power and resistance. **They don't just contribute to strength; they ARE the strength.** They offer resistance. They strike effective (or heavy) physical or moral blows. At the strategic level, they are usually leaders and populations determined to prevail. At operational and tactical levels they are almost invariably specific military forces.

This change, by itself, would make it easier for military and civilian campaign planners in the Joint community to communicate their understanding of enemy and friendly centers of gravity and plan accordingly.

Part 2 of this article will offer the Joint community a model, or construct, useful for the analysis of centers of gravity (CGs) and their associated critical vulnerabilities (CVs) in planning Joint campaigns. This model introduces two new terms – critical capabilities and critical requirements – that bridge the gap between CGs and CVs, and enable planners to determine which weaknesses of an enemy or friendly CG are likely to

be decisive in a campaign or operation. The Battle of the Atlantic is the historical case used to illustrate how this CG-CC-CR-CV model can be used as an effective forward planning tool for modern-day planners of Joint campaigns.