

A review by Per Andersson

"It was my ambition to write a book that would not be forgotten after two or three years, and that possibly might be picked up more than once by those who are interested in the subject"  
Carl von Clausewitz (1818)

Clausewitz has routinely been declared obsolete throughout the ages, usually after some significant evolution in the conduct of war, often driven by new technology. This is always short lived and his teachings are inevitably resurrected. His lifetimes work, *On War*, has always courted controversy, not least because it is such a complex and difficult book to read, exacerbated by its unfinished state when published. This has led to huge misunderstandings of his thinking, generally by those who have quoted isolated statements without relating these to the totality of the work. Whilst much of his oeuvre has long since gone stale, there is an enduring attraction based on his human-centric approach and intuitive understanding of the realities of war; He alone, "...appears able to withstand every kind of political, social, economic and technological change".

This paper focusses on the theoretical capstone of Clausewitz's work, his 'remarkable trinity'. Whilst much of *On War* has been rendered obsolete, the essence of Clausewitzian wisdom is as relevant as ever, albeit with limited utility as a forecasting tool.

The nature of war

The first chapter of book one of *On War* is, "the only part completed to the author's satisfaction", and also, "the most densely packed with ideas", setting out his theory on the nature of war. This starts with an illuminating definition that immediately emphasises, "the distinction between military aim and political objective". He then develops a framework for war working from the logical absolute state to war as practiced in reality, giving a number of generic explanations for the difference between the theoretical vision and the practical 'ground truth'. His analytical method has a timeless quality due to the balanced fusion of rational and non-rational elements, presenting the calculating side complemented by the unpredictable qualities of war.

In the final section, *The Consequences for Theory*, he sets out the basis of his 'remarkable trinity'. This is effectively, "a sophisticated system of checks and balances where the organised use of armed force is concerned". This combines two of his greatest ideas; the dominance of politics in war and the uncertain nature of war. In describing war as "more than a true chameleon", he is saying that it can adopt radically different forms, the stimulant for these changes coming from the elements of his trinity. War, "is like an object suspended between three magnets, representing the three forces of the rational ("instrument of policy"), irrational ("primordial violence, hatred and enmity") and non-rational ("the play of chance and probability" and "friction"). These forces are "mainly" connected to one of three classes of human actors; the government the people, and the army. Clausewitz would be aware that if such a pendulum

is set swinging it, "behaves in a nonlinear manner", just as war follows a dynamic, unpredictable tract under the constantly changing influence of these forces.

Alan Beyerchen utilises mathematical concepts (including the application of chaos theory) to better comprehend the nonlinear nature of war, concluding that, "our ability to predict the course and outcome of any given conflict is severely limited". Whilst this is not comforting for those desiring a predictive theory, it reinforces Clausewitz's contemporary importance, demonstrating the genius of his metaphor and explaining its enduring ability to replicate the realities of war. This analysis also offers a new perspective on Clausewitz's much misunderstood central dictum, "war is merely the continuation of policy by other means". Like war, politics is a nonlinear struggle between opposing forces; coupled with the feedback from the political consequences of events in war, it is obvious that even the rational forces are not stable. If we superimpose further interconnected trinities representing the other parties to the war (allies and opponents), with their own political aims the environment of war becomes an even more complex, dynamic continuum.

After the failure of US technology to deliver victory in Vietnam, it was realized that, "war cannot be reduced to simple formulas", leading to the rediscovery of, "the non-material qualitative dimensions of war Clausewitz emphasized". It is the trinity's, "capacity to encompass so much of the nature of war", that makes it such a valuable analytical tool.

#### Conventional operations post the RMA

The first aspect of modern warfare for examination is conventional war (post RMA); utilising high technology and effects based operations to fight a high tempo war, in order to achieve victory as efficiently as possible. The two recent Persian Gulf Wars have exemplified this approach, albeit with opponents possessing a huge difference in military capabilities. One interpretation of the 1991 conflict is as an example of strong compliance with Clausewitzian principles; the Military where given clear direction by the UN Security Council mandate and formulated effective plans to achieve this whilst remaining subordinate to the policy. When the opportunity came for the military to extend its remit, (supported by sizeable elements of the US population) by continuing the war to Baghdad, the government stuck to its policy and terminated the war.

Robert Callum contends that this war resulted in a great military victory but a greater political defeat due to, "the lack of a coherent, thoughtful strategy in the three realms of war that together define the Clausewitzian trinity". He argues that a disregard for Clausewitz's tenets resulted in politics becoming divorced from warfare; this confusion between 'political' and 'military' goals led to the 'premature' cease fire, denying the attainment of overarching political goals. Callum blames this defeat on: (a) Policy: a shallow strategy with ill defined objectives. (b) Friction: military leadership lacked the vision to see through the fog of war. (c) Emotion: the allied populations lacked the stomach for inflicting violence on the enemy beyond attaining the immediate goal. The US ignored Clausewitz's basic tenet; "No one starts a war - or rather no one in his sense ought to do so – without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it".

The same is true, to an even greater extent, of the 2003 invasion and resultant occupation; An incoherent political strategy coupled with a prioritisation of military imperatives resulted in suspicion then condemnation from the global masses. The ignorance of the Clausewitzian reality that war does not have a logic of its own led to inevitable strategic failure. Clearly both of these modern wars lend themselves to 'Clausewitzian analysis' from different perspectives and reinforce his dictum that, "in war the result is never final".

So what about the technological changes of the RMA? Handel initially contended that the enormous changes brought by new materiel requires the addition of a fourth dimension to the trinity based on the three existing dimensions. After the end of the Cold War and a decade of operations dominated by technology; he now asserts that, "technology, while of the greatest importance, is still only the means; as such, it is always secondary to the political and strategic non-material dimensions of war". In other words he has arrived at a perspective Clausewitz would be happy with.

Antulio Echevarria believes there is no requirement for a fourth component as technology already resides within each of the three areas. Ultimately, "the interdependency of various components will remain unchanged despite technological advances", as "technological advances affect the grammar of war, not its logic...the RMA will simply expand the immediacy for each component in its interaction with the others". Hence the essence of war does not change; the political and human interaction advocated by Clausewitz remains intact, as does the relevance of his theory.

### Operations Other Than War

Operations Other Than War (OOTW) are generally not armed conflicts against a nation state but military tasks to establish security in an area to allow other non-combat tasks to proceed. Mark Redlinger presents an interesting analysis of the UN military operation in Somalia utilising Clausewitzian conceptual tools, arguing that the ends and means were not established prior to embarking on operations, resulting in discordance between political and military objectives. Tasked with 'the provision of a secure environment', he assessed the only strategy available to neutralise the opposing armed forces was one of exhaustion, through a, "clear understanding of the weaknesses within the Clausewitzian trinity so as to attack the centre of gravity of that triangle". Redlinger contends that the clan structure conforms well to the trinity model, with a political end derived from the leader or warlord, a military means from all the men of fighting age, supported and influenced by the remainder of the clan. Where one clan (in this case led by Aideed) obstructed the process of conformance to peaceful behaviour, it's Clausewitzian trinity must be disrupted by, "affecting the will of the people or removing the influence of the warlord or neutralizing the clan militia or combinations thereof".

What actually happened in Somalia was a violation of Clausewitzian concepts; ambiguous political objectives compounded by a breakdown between (UN) political and military leadership, further exacerbated by the fact that the military commander had to respond to a second (US) political boss with conflicting priorities. Ultimately the deaths of a relatively small number of American troops shattered the (US) political and domestic will to continue, condemning the UN effort to failure. As Clausewitz observed, "If policy is directed only toward minor objectives, the

emotions of the masses will have to be stirred" – clearly the masses within the USA where not sufficiently stimulated to support this mission.

The final part of the trinity, the military, accomplished the missions given to it but was rendered impotent by the reluctance of the political leadership to authorise high risk operations. This resulted in a collapse of an already ineffectual trinity resulting in a total failure to achieve political objectives. This example demonstrates that Clausewitzian principles are directly relevant today in the realm of OOTW; the fundamental elements still present, particularly the need for, "integration of the players in the Clausewitzian trinity".

Paul Cornish constructs an ethical argument for the relevance of Clausewitz in modern 'humanitarian intervention' ops based on the just war tradition. He contends that the trinity can be interpreted with an ethical dimension. He concludes that while, "Clausewitz was not a moral philosopher...(his) theory and the just war tradition are functionally compatible in that both are concerned to seek a balance between means and ends, adopt a broadly similar layered structure and insist on the primacy of individual judgement". This further demonstrates the flexibility and extensive utility of Clausewitz's concepts.

An expanding area of non-conventional military activity is counter-terrorist (CT) operations, particularly, post 9/11, involving revolutionary, radical Islamic groups. Frank Young argues that it is important to apply Clausewitz's principles, particularly proportionality and political primacy, to guide the use of force as a tool of CT policy. However, as Colin Powell articulated, even a successful military operation, "may not be sufficient to ensure a long-term solution to the problem".

Philip Meilinger provides a different perspective, blaming Clausewitz's influence over US army commanders for their myopia within the current 'global war on terror'. He claims Clausewitz's, "two essential ideas are in opposition to one another" and this has been responsible for a disastrous strategy of attrition with the terrorists. This argument is based on two intellectual flaws; an, "impoverished idea of Clausewitz's complex, dialectical writing", and a shallow view that, "non-Western actors wage war with politics left out".

Porter's response destroys Meilinger's notion that non-Western, people fight purely out of primal urges by quoting Al Qaeda's chief theoretician, Ayman al-Zawahiri, a man clearly focussed on "policy aims, practical outcomes, and the relationship between ends and means". The application of Clausewitz's trinity (unmentioned by Meilinger) to this area then is entirely valid and can be used to explain why certain (US) strategies have not been entirely successful.

Tony Corn's controversial view suggests "anthropology, not Clausewitzology...will provide the conceptual weapons" required in the post 9/11 'jihad'. This polarised argument is thought provoking but misses the point; the application of Clausewitzian concepts to enhance understanding of a conflict is not an exclusive process. Furthermore, his multidimensional trinity has as much capacity to encompass concurrent analytical lines (such as anthropology) as the imagination and intellect of the analyst allows.

Martin van Creveld claims that the trinitarian model may no longer be valid due to the future

trends in warfare away from the dominance of people, army and government. Whilst his predictions are compelling, the fundamental forces within the trinity, violence, chance and policy, remain embedded in this vision; it is only the links to human actors that may well change as war evolves, as has been illustrated in this section

Clausewitz does not present doctrine or regulations for the practitioners of war to follow, but instead provides a theory that is a basis for the study of war, encapsulated within his 'remarkable trinity'. However, this theory does not allow for the forecasting of a wars course (by its very nature war is inherently unpredictable, as Clausewitz was at pains to communicate) but endures as a "valuable, if complex, analytical tool" The utility of this tool rests on its accurate depiction of the nature of war which has been demonstrated in a number of modern warfare situations across the spectrum of conflict. Despite changes in society and technology, the central human dimension remains timeless and the Clausewitzian trinity, "sufficiently flexible to accommodate all types of war".

There have been many detractors who have used attacks on the Prussian prodigy to enhance their own profile, however much of this criticism is based on intellectual flaws and misunderstandings of both Clausewitz's complex writing and the situation it is being applied to.

It is probably true that *On War* is, "significantly limited by the historical and political context within which it was written". It is acknowledged that his many observations on the detailed conduct of war are long obsolete, and there are several important areas that he has simply not addressed. It is also a fact that Clausewitz does not have a monopoly on wisdom; for a more holistic understanding of war as a rational political instrument - compare his teachings (concerned with effectiveness) with Sun Tzu's classic essays (focussed more on efficiency).

However, none of these criticisms have damaged the appeal of Clausewitz today and whilst, there is no obligation to accept every aspect of his argument, there is little to be gained by a wholesale rejection of Clausewitz". Paradoxically, he has even been studied by Al Qaeda and his ideas incorporated into their doctrine for the most modern practice of asymmetric warfare. As Hooker stated, "Clausewitz endures, not because he is universally understood or accepted but because he is so often right about first principles".

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