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War, Politics, and RMA—
The Legacy of Clausewitz

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Over the last few years practitioners and students of war alike have debated the nature and impact of the revolution in military affairs (RMA) on future war, especially with its emphasis on speed, precision, and intelligence rather than the mass production and target saturation so characteristic of industrial-age warfare. Moreover, analysts have pondered the impact of RMA on the structure and philosophy of the Army of the 21st century, conflicts short of war, and information warfare. All of these observers agree that even though older forms of war will continue to co-exist with newer ones, RMA, when complete, will mean that future war will differ fundamentally from wars of the past. It will include more intelligent warriors, knowledge-oriented weaponry, a five-dimensional battlefield (namely, breadth, depth, height, space, and time—the ability and subsequent need to act within an enemy's decision cycle), global envelopment, capabilities to attack simultaneously and precisely on the tactical, operational, and strategic levels, and an explicit "civilianization of war" in terms of increased direct and indirect public participation. In addition, RMA will likely challenge statecraft as diplomats adapt to the flow of real-time data, its

effect on public opinion, and the uncertain political capabilities and limits of future war.

Given the extent of such change, does the thought of Carl von Clausewitz, developed one hundred and seventy years ago, offer anything to warfighters of the future? Indeed, some say that Clausewitz's funeral rites are overdue: "[Future] war will be fought not to pursue national interests, but to kill enemy leaders, to convert opponents. . . . Thus the core of Clausewitz's philosophy of war—that states wage wars using armies in pursuit of political objectives—will disappear."[1] Some think that nuclear weapons, transnational constabulary warfare, anti-terrorism, counter-narcotrafficking, and

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greater compartmentalization among political and military leaders render obsolete the Clausewitzian definition of war as an act of policy and his tripartite concept of war.[2] Moreover, the relevance of *On War*[3] appears suspect for not addressing war as a cultural phenomenon: it not only fails to explain why wars occur, it views war from the perspective of the Western nation-state paradigm.[4] However, such arguments fundamentally misunderstood what Clausewitz meant by politics. In fact, despite technological changes introduced by RMA—as well as those brought about by nuclear weapons—his conception of war remains valid.

In Search of *Politik*

Clausewitz's description of war as a "continuation of politics (*Politik*) by other means" is well known but unfortunately is often interpreted to mean that war is merely an act of state policy aimed at achieving political aims. Part of this confusion stems from the ambiguity of the term *Politik,* which means both policy and politics. But Clausewitz also deserves some blame for neglecting to define in simple language how this multivalent term was to be understood. German scholars and soldiers alike have puzzled over that since

the last century. Eberhard Kessel argued, for example, that for Clausewitz *Politik* consisted of subjective and objective elements. The former related to choices by political leaders about the type of war to wage and the specific aims to pursue. The latter involved dominant ideas, emotions, and political interrelationships unique to a given time and place.[5]

In fact, Clausewitz's varied use of *Politik* and the context in which he wrote indicate that he signified three things with the term. First, it meant policy, the extension of the will of the state, the decision to pursue goals, political or otherwise. Second, it meant politics as an external state of affairs—strengths and weaknesses imposed by geopolitical position, resources, treaty, etc.—and as a process of internal interaction between key decisionmaking institutions and the personalities of policymakers. Last, it meant an historically causative force, providing an explanatory framework for examining war's various manifestations over time.

The first definition appears principally in the first chapter of *On War* which discusses the nature of war. A prefatory note indicates that Clausewitz considered only this chapter to be in final form. But one must resist the temptation to read no further, for while it might appear that the essence of Clausewitz's message can be grasped in 15 pages rather than 600, this is not the case. As one authority observes, strong though circumstantial evidence suggests that the note was written when *On War* was closer to completion than generally believed.[6] Thus, individuals seeking a "genuine understanding of Clausewitz cannot escape the task of actually reading *On War*."[7] Indeed, one should read his other works as well. For example, his notes on history and politics and the essay on "Agitation" (*Umtriebe*) reveal that his ideas were continually evolving. The hefty tome *On War* constitutes barely a third of them.[8] Clausewitz is often clearer when read in German, but the prerequisites for understanding this great theorist are really patience and a will to reflect.

Karl Philipp Gottlieb von Clausewitz.

Political Forces

The final three books of *On War*— on defense, attack, and war plans— contain the majority of Clausewitz's mature ideas pertaining to the influence of politics on war. They also disclose that his military thought was becoming increasingly historicist. He sought to interpret historical epochs on their own terms and understood that those who lived and fought in past wars were governed by institutions, values, and beliefs unique to a specific time and place. In "The Scale of the Military Objective and of the Effort To Be Made," Clausewitz broadens his concept of *Politik* to encompass the first and second definitions mentioned above. He refers to policymaking, for example, as more than a mere act of intelligence or product of pure reason: It is "an art in the broadest meaning of the term—the faculty of using judgment to detect the most important and decisive elements in the vast array of facts and situations." This judgment, in turn, was highly subjective, affected by "qualities of mind and character of the men making the decision—of the rulers, statesmen, and commanders, whether these roles are united in a single individual or not." States or societies were not limited in form to monarchies (constitutional or absolutist) and semi-rigid social hierarchies

characteristic of his day, but "determined by their times and prevailing conditions." A state, for instance, can be a united, sovereign entity, a "personified intelligence acting according to simple and logical rules," or merely "an agglomeration of loosely associated forces." Hence, the definition applies equally to feudal rulers, drug cartels, or terrorist groups. Even numerous European military institutions (for instance, armies and command structures) have "differed in the various periods." In fact, in his later books Clausewitz uses the term *military* to mean all institutions, procedures, philosophies, and values of the military as a community.

Clausewitz employed several historical examples to show how policy and political forces have shaped war from antiquity to the modern age. His chapter "The Scale of the Objective" includes vastly different yet profoundly similar wars of conquest and plunder carried out by semi-nomadic Tartars and those of expansion prosecuted by Napoleon's armies. Selecting the Tartars as an example of politics directing war is significant, for some would claim that their "tribal societies" fall outside the Western nation-state paradigm.[9] Tartar tribes originated in Central Asia along with other Turkic peoples. In the 12th and 13th centuries they were overtaken by Mongols and mixed with them. They participated in Mongol invasions of eastern Europe and the Middle East.[10] They eventually converted to Islam and joined in Ottoman *Jihads* (holy wars of conversion) against the West. Tartar bands even raided Prussia in 1656–57, burning hundreds of villages, killing 23,000, and enslaving 34,000.[11] They thus fought for booty, to convert infidels, to kill enemy leaders, and for entertainment—all motives for future war as cited above. Yet, such motives, as Clausewitz knew, were shaped by resources available to the Tartars, their geopolitical role as a composite of Turkish and Mongol nations located in Central Asia, their nomadic culture and traditions, and the religious influence of Islam. These factors all fell under the rubric of political forces in Clausewitz's mind.

While the Tartar system of formulating policy appears less sophisticated than that of Frederick the Great or Napoleon Bonaparte, it proved no less decisive in developing strategies and directing military force in pursuit of political objectives. As seen in this example, Clausewitz's use of *Politik* affords both a transhistorical and transcultural perspective on war, one that at the same time respects historical and cultural uniqueness. Thus the elements that shape policy are both situational and cultural, objective and sub-

technological advances affect the grammar of war, not its logic

jective (or rational, nonrational, and irrational according to political-scientific models).[12] "The aims a belligerent adopts, and the resources he employs, will be governed by the particular characteristics of his own [geopolitical] position; but they will also conform to the spirit of the age and to its general character."

Technology and the Trinity

With a more complete understanding of what Clausewitz meant by *Politik*, we can examine his tripartite conception of war in some detail. This "remarkable or paradoxical trinity," as it has been called, is Clausewitz's framework, or model, for understanding the changeable and diverse nature of war. The forces that comprise it—blind emotion, chance, and politics—function like "three different codes of law, deeply rooted in their subject and yet variable in their relationship to one another." They, in turn, correspond to three representative bodies—the character and disposition of the populace, skill and prowess of the military, and wisdom and intelligence of the government.

Despite revolutionary advances in technology, this trinity remains relevant to future war. Technology does not require adding a fourth component to the trinity, squaring the triangle, as has been suggested.[13] Technological advances will not alter the framework of war since they affect the grammar of war, not its logic. In other words, new technologies change only war's form, not its nature. War is multidimensional

and chameleon-like, composed of subjective as well as objective natures. The former consist of war's means. Since they vary over time and place, Clausewitz dubbed them subjective. The latter, on the other hand, embrace elements of violence, uncertainty, chance, and friction; and while embodying many varieties and intensities, they remain a constant part of war despite time and place. Moreover, because war is not an autonomous activity but a social and human event, it has two tendencies, escalation and reciprocation.

Absent the moderating influence of policy and debilitating force of friction, these tendencies push warfighting toward a violent extreme. Thus, for Clausewitz war might change color like a chameleon, but its essential nature remains constant—violent, unpredictable, and prone to escalation.

Technology, in fact, resides in all elements of the trinity without altering their inter-relationship. Military technology, for example, might be defined as any technology used by a nation's forces for military purposes. While items such as missiles fall in the military corner of the trinity, their component technologies (such as microchips) usually originate in the private sector. Indeed, technologies related to communications and transportation have broad application in all branches of the trinity, thereby defying pat labels. The point is that the interdependency of various components of the trinity will remain unchanged despite technological advances. The evolving information and communication technologies of RMA will simply expand the immediacy—by shortening response times and heightening sensitivity—for each component in its interaction with the others.[14]

Information technology will certainly demand increases in the intelligence levels of military personnel and civilians alike, or at least oblige them to process more information in less time. But it will not change the fact that ruling bodies—legitimate governments, revolutionary cells, terrorist gangs, or drug cartels—will make decisions on

when, where, how, and why to apply force. Their decisions will be influenced by political forces such as power relationships linked to alliances and treaties (either perceived or real), the effectiveness of key institutions involved in decisionmaking, and general assumptions, beliefs, and expectations held by decisionmakers. Events surrounding the Cuban Missile Crisis and October 1973 War reveal that even in the modern age misperceptions continue to create and/or exacerbate crises.[15] Technology will speed the transmission of information (already approaching real time), even provide it in new forms (such as satellite imagery), and may, depending on the scenario, reduce or expand the time for making decisions. But decisionmakers will continue to receive a vast quantity of information through subjective filters; thus, their decisions will remain largely a matter of judgment, and that judgment will be shaped by political forces.

Paradoxically, new technology increases and decreases violence, chance, uncertainty, and friction in unforeseen and uneven ways. New weapons systems enable both sides to observe and strike simultaneously throughout the depth of a battlefield, thus eliminating safe areas. The five-dimensional battlefield means that operational commanders must consider defeating either an attack or a counterattack from various directions at any time. A general "lack of immunity" will prevail as units at all echelons of command and control endure greater risk.[16] Precision-guided weapons and munitions do increase the certainty of a hit or kill, but the weak link will be supplying reliable and timely target data.[17] Enemies will take measures and countermeasures against this, and tactics will change as a result. Thus new technology alone will not prove decisive in future war; it will require a harness of sorts—a flexible, comprehensive doctrine that integrates the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war. The objective nature of Clausewitz's concept of war will remain relevant.

The Nuclear Factor

Even the development of nuclear arms, the so-called absolute weapon, has not meant the death of Clausewitz,

USS Cape St. George firing SM–2 standard missile.

U.S. Navy (Johnny Wilson)

as some claim.[18] His dictum that "war is the continuation of *Politik* by other means" is as valid in a nuclear conflict as in conventional war. The evolution of nuclear strategy from massive retali-

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ation in the 1950s to flexible response in the early 1960s, for instance, shows how *Politik* affects war even in the nuclear age.[19] Since 1945 policymakers have duly responded to changing situations, growing strike and counterstrike capabilities, and the will of the populace by determining that, because of attendant risks, nuclear war did not suit national objectives; hence, other more conventional forms of war received more attention while nuclear weapons assumed a deterrent role. Policy and politics have patently conspired to force the avoidance of nuclear war.

The destructive power of nuclear weapons, prospect of runaway escalation, and concept of superconductivity—the elimination of friction by reducing the chain of events between the *decision* to launch and the *actual* launch of a strike—will reduce or negate the influence of policymakers on nuclear war should it occur.[20] Obviously, until the technology is developed to harmlessly disarm nuclear weapons in flight, the possibility of aborting or down-scaling nuclear war after a launch is minimal. But such realities are merely products of the times and constitute what Clausewitz, in his historicist approach, would have considered the subjective elements of war—means selected for its prosecution—that distinguish nuclear war from other forms of conflict in the nuclear age. It might be an exaggeration to claim that such means are the ultimate expression of the remarkable trinity in terms of absolute war, but not by much.

Again, Clausewitz's mature thought does not insist that warfare serves a purely rational political aim. In any event, the definition of a rational political aim is largely subjective. A terrorist

group can launch suicide bombings that it considers completely rational. Indeed, the current world order advances the possibility of a limited nuclear exchange between states or groups which have relatively small arsenals.[21] Far from restricting the influence of *Politik* over war, such a climate is likely to increase it, while admittedly reducing the time policymakers have to react to a strike.

Nuclear weaponry does not render irrelevant the intelligence of the government, skill of the military, and emotive force of the populace as some believe. Rather, the advent of such weapons and attendant strategies reveals that each component of the trinity changes over time. Diplomacy is more aware that military action of any sort might generate unintended consequences and runaway escalation, and it has developed systemic checks and precautions to prevent that. The military has gradually altered its warrior ethos to prize rather than eschew intelligence and technical expertise. The public has also changed, becoming more educated and politicized, and growing more sensitive to the fact that the future rests in the hands of a few chosen officials. Such developments do not invalidate Clausewitz's trinity but speak instead to its lasting durability and intrinsic dynamism.

Of course, not all of Clausewitz's military thinking remains relevant. His vision of war did not include the economic, air, sea, and space dimensions, for example. But his conception of war, his remarkable trinity, and his grasp of the relationship between *Politik* and war will endure as long as states, drug cartels, warrior clans, and terrorist groups have a mind to wage war. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] Steven Metz, "A Wake for Clausewitz: Toward a Philosophy of 21st Century Warfare," *Parameters*, vol. 24, no. 4 (Winter 1994–95), pp. 126–32, here p. 130.

[2] John E. Sheppard, Jr., "*On War:* Is Clausewitz Still Relevant?" *Parameters*, vol. 20, no. 3 (September 1990), pp. 85–99; Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), pp. 33–62.

[3] Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

[4] John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).

[5] In its polemics with Hans Delbrück, the German great general staff argued that war was indeed subordinate to politics, but that political forces had changed since Clausewitz's day. They saw politics as a social-Darwinistic struggle for national existence that demanded war be waged to the utmost.

[6] It also appears in Azar Gat, *The Origins of Military Thought from the Enlightenment to Clausewitz* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 255–63.

[7] Christopher Bassford, *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America 1815–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 7.

[8] These and other essays are found in Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, edited and translated by Peter Paret and Daniel Moran, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[9] Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, pp. 11–40; van Creveld, *The Transformation of War,* pp. 33–62.

[10] Douglas S. Benson, *The Tartar War* (Chicago: Maverick Publishing, 1981).

[11] F.L. Carsten, *The Origins of Prussia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 208.

[12] See Bassford's discussion in *Clausewitz*, pp. 22–24, and "John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Trashing Clausewitz: A Polemic," *War in History,* vol. 1, no. 3 (1994), pp. 319–36.

[13] Michael Handel, "Clausewitz in the Age of Technology," in *Clausewitz and Modern Strategy*, edited by Michael Handel (Totowa, N.J.: Frank Cass, 1986), pp. 58–62.

[14] See also David Jablonsky, "U.S. Military Doctrine and the Revolution in Military Affairs," *Parameters*, vol. 24, no. 3 (Autumn 1994), p. 34.

[15] Robert B. McCalla, *Uncertain Perceptions: U.S. Cold War Crisis Decision Making* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992).

[16] Avraham Rotem, "The Land Battle of the 1990s," in *Technology and Strategy: Future Trends*, edited by Shai Feldman (Jerusalem: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 1989), p. 56.

[17] Shai Feldman, "Technology and Strategy: Concluding Remarks," in *Technology and Strategy*, p. 130.

[18] Sheppard, "Is Clausewitz Still Relevant?" pp. 88–91; and Martin van Creveld, *Nuclear Proliferation and the Future of Conflict* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), pp. 43–64.

[19] The history of nuclear strategy did not end there. Strategies of the early 1960s gave rise to mutual assured destruction, mutual agreed assured destruction, Carter's countervailing strategy, Reagan's strategic defense initiative, etc. Donald M. Snow, *National Security: Enduring Problems in a Changing Defense Environment*, 2nd edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991); Henry S. Rowen, "The Evolution of Strategic Nuclear Doctrine," in *Strategic Thought in the Nuclear Age*, edited by Laurence Martin (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 131–56; and Fan Zhen Jiang, "Is War Obsolete? A Chinese Perspective," in *Essays on Strategy VI*, edited by Thomas C. Gill (Washington: National Defense University Press, 1989), pp. 189–201.

[20] Stephen J. Cimbala, *Force and Diplomacy in the Future* (New York: Praeger, 1992); and Richard N. Lebow, "Clausewitz and Crisis Stability," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 1 (Spring 1988), pp. 81–110.

[21] Jerome Kahan, *Nuclear Threats from Small States* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 1994).