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## CLAUSEWITZ: TOWARD A THEORY OF APPLIED STRATEGY

by Antulio J. Echevarria II

Concerned that an early death might prematurely terminate his masterwork, *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz wrote a number of introductory notes describing the purpose of his manuscript and the direction he intended to take with future revisions. Four such notes inform our understanding of *On War* and Clausewitz's intent: the "Author's Preface" written between 1816-18;\*1 the "Author's Comment" written in 1818; the note of 10 July 1827; and the undated, unfinished note "presumably written in 1830."\*2 Thanks to the work of historian Azar Gat, the dating of the last note has recently become problematic for Clausewitzian scholars. Gat has argued that the undated note was written not in 1830, but prior to the note of 10 July 1827, perhaps earlier in the same year. In his opinion, the undated note reflects the "crisis" that Clausewitz encountered when he realized that his theory of war failed to account for the fact that limited wars have occurred more frequently in history than wars aimed at completely defeating the enemy.\*3 It is the note of 10 July 1827 which, Gat believes, contains the solution to this crisis in the form of Clausewitz's new ideas concerning the primacy of politics in war. On the other hand, Clausewitz's widow, Marie, wrote that the undated note appeared to be "of a very recent date."\*4 In it, Clausewitz states that he regarded only Chapter 1 of Book I as finished. This disclosure, combined with the fact that Clausewitz's brother-in-law, Count Friedrich von Brühl, found among Clausewitz's papers a series of revisions intended for Book I, seems to support what we know of his plan to revise *On War* according to the steps outlined in the note of 1827.\*5 Thus, the undated note appears to complement the note of 1827, and for these reasons, Clausewitzian scholars such as Michael Howard and Peter Paret had previously concluded that it was probably written in the spring of 1830, as Clausewitz sealed and packed his papers in preparation for his assignment to Breslau to command the artillery inspection located there.\*6

While we may never know for certain whether the undated note was written before or after the note of 1827, its contents still remain important to our understanding of Clausewitz as a military thinker. Although the note of 1827 contains the essential elements of Clausewitz's ideas as we know them today (e.g., the distinction between absolute and limited war, and his belief that "war is nothing but the continuation of policy with other means"), the undated note, whether placed before or after the note of 1827, adds another dimension to Clausewitz's military thought. In short, it suggests that he was on the verge of developing a theory of applied strategy, or an operational-level theory for the conduct of war. In particular, the last paragraph of the undated note reveals that Clausewitz had identified several "statements" (*Sätzen*), (or "secondary propositions" as Peter Paret has called them) which might be used to guide the conduct of operations:

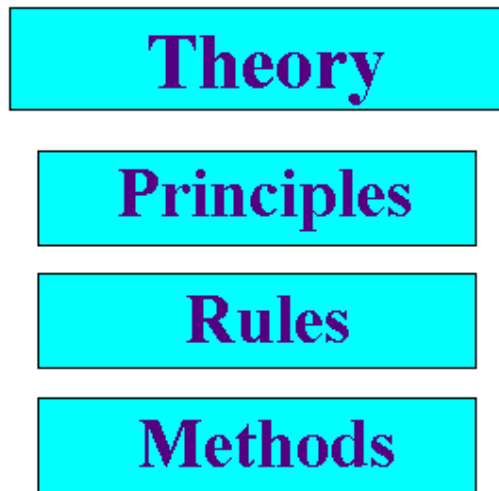
"It is a very difficult task to construct a scientific theory for the art of war, and so many attempts have failed that most people say that it is impossible, since it deals with matters that no permanent law can provide for. One would agree and abandon the attempt were it not for the obvious fact that a whole range of propositions can be demonstrated without difficulty: that *defense is the stronger*

*form of fighting with a negative purpose, attack the weaker form with a positive purpose; that major successes help bring about minor ones, ... ; that a demonstration is a weaker use of force than a real attack, ... ; that victory consists not only in the occupation of the battlefield, but in the destruction of the enemy's physical and psychic forces, ... ; that success is always greatest at the point where victory was gained, ... ; that a turning movement can only be justified by general superiority ... ; that flank-positions are governed by the same consideration; that every attack loses impetus as it progresses [emphasis added]."\*7*

As it stands, the list is certainly incomplete. Clausewitz might also have included other important operational concepts such as *center of gravity*, *concentration*, and *economy of force*.<sup>\*8</sup> Those that he did mention appear throughout the corpus of *On War*, and, based on thematic similarities between the last two paragraphs of the undated note and Chapter 1 of Book VIII, seem to have been compiled, as does the undated note itself, while Clausewitz was in the process of writing or rewriting Books VI-VIII. This essay examines each of the secondary propositions, excepting Clausewitz's statement that a "demonstration is a weaker use of force than a real attack,"<sup>\*9</sup> as it is merely a definition, and suggests that they do in fact represent principles -- as Clausewitz had defined the term -- for a theory of applied strategy.

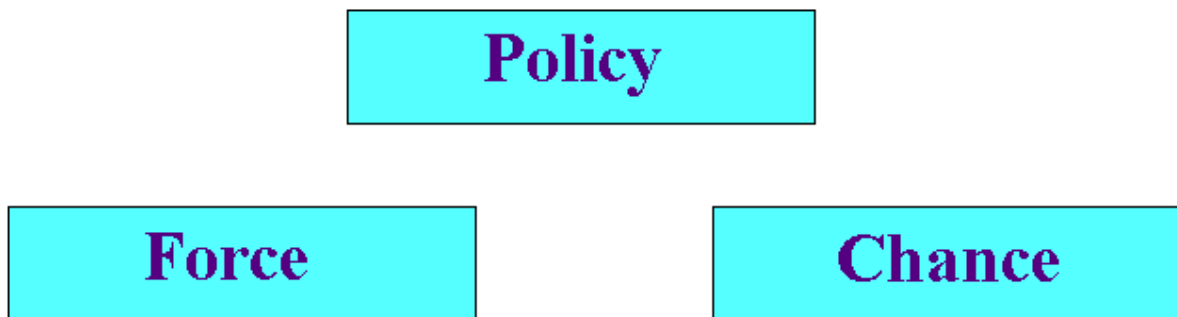
Before proceeding further, however, we must understand that, in general, Clausewitz recognized only two levels of war: *strategic* -- the use of battles to achieve the military and political objective of the war; and *tactical* -- the art of winning battles. He saw the conduct of operations as an integral part of strategy, or the art of war, but he used the terms "art of war"--*Kriegskunst*, "strategy"--*Strategie*, and "conduct of war"--*Kriegführung*, almost interchangeably. But, in Books VI-VIII, which reflect most of his mature theories, he focused almost exclusively on the conduct of operations, or the practical execution of strategy. These books contain a number of observations concerning "campaign plans"--*Feldzugsplanen*, "theaters of war"--*Kriegstheater*, "individual armies' zones of operations"--*einzelnen Heergebiete*, and "principles for the execution of strategy"--*Grundsätze der Mittel und Wege* as they applied to defense and attack and to limited and unlimited war--hence, the term applied strategy.

To fully understand the significance of his list of propositions, we must also review Clausewitz's concept of theory. "The primary purpose of any theory," he wrote, "is to clarify concepts and ideas that have become confused and entangled."<sup>\*10</sup> Theory should explain rather than prescribe. It should reflect *reality* or, in Clausewitz's words, the "world of action," which is governed, as he saw it, by a logical hierarchy consisting of laws, principles, rules, and prescriptions and methods.<sup>\*11</sup> *Laws* are universal and absolute; they reveal the cause-and-effect relationship between things, and determine action (e.g., Newton's Laws of Motion). In Clausewitz's opinion, laws did not belong in a theory of war, since the phenomenon of war consisted of "too much change and diversity" to allow action to be traced to a single cause; nonetheless, he used the term law on numerous occasions. *Principles* are deductions reflecting only the "spirit and sense" of a law; they may be universal but they are not absolute (e.g., all available force should be concentrated at the decisive point). Principles provide a guide for action -- they allow for the diversity common to combat situations but call upon the commander to exercise sound judgment in their application. *Rules* are inferences based on experience. Rules resemble principles--they are not absolute; they rest on a truth but allow for exceptions (e.g., cavalry should not be used against unbroken infantry), but they are more specific than principles. *Prescriptions and methods* are merely the regulations and routines which armies develop to handle their day-to-day business (e.g., standard operating procedures, drill manuals, etc.). Each of these components represents a "nucleus of truth" which theory must address.



[Figure 1 -- Clausewitz's Structure of Theory]

Clausewitz's next task was to combine these elements under a single, unifying theme -- a controlling element -- in his words, a "point at which all lines converge."<sup>12</sup> This controlling element, the foundation for his theory, had to maintain a balance between the "three magnets" of the remarkable trinity -- blind emotional force, chance, and reason -- which provided a *framework*, or model, for understanding war's changeable and diverse nature:

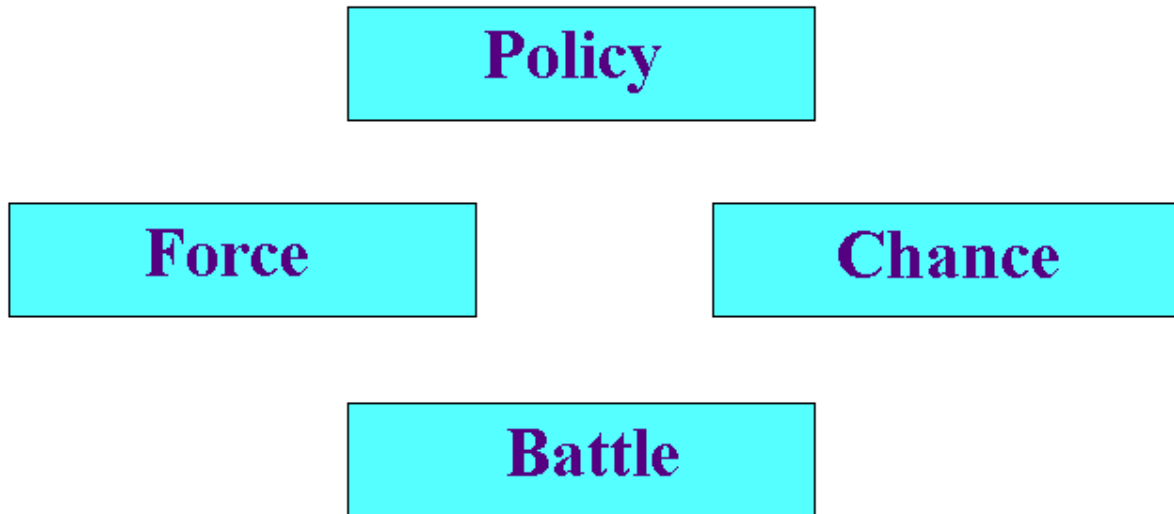


[Figure 2 -- Clausewitz's Remarkable Trinity]

"These three tendencies are like three different codes of law, deeply-rooted in their subject and yet variable in their relationship to one another. A theory that ignores any one of them or seeks to fix an arbitrary relationship between them would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless."<sup>13</sup>

Although the "remarkable trinity" itself was not a theory, *per se*, Clausewitz believed that it provided the basis for one. Originally, the concept of *battle* or the engagement -- fighting itself -- supplied Clausewitz's single, unifying theme linking the various components of his theory of strategy: "Strategy is nothing without battle, for battle is the material that it applies, the very means that it employs. Just as tactics is the employment of military forces in battle, so strategy is the employment of battles . . . to achieve the object of war."<sup>14</sup> *Fighting*, including the threat of a fight,

became the "essential military activity," and the destruction of the enemy's forces served as Clausewitz's "overriding principle of war."\*15



[Figure 3 -- Battle as the Central Element in Clausewitz's Theory of War]

While Gat has correctly argued the Clausewitz's crisis involved the threat that limited wars posed to his overall conception of war, he overlooked the significance of the last paragraph of the undated note. A passage from Chapter 30 of Book VI, reveals Clausewitz's problem more clearly:

"Now we come to another question: whether a set of all-encompassing principles, rules, and methods may be formulated for these endeavors. Our reply must be that history has not guided us to any recurrent forms ... A war in which great decisions are involved is not only simpler but also less inconsistent ... In such a case, reason can make rules and laws, but in the type of war we have been describing this seems far more difficult. Two main principles for the conduct of major wars have evolved in our own time: Bülow's "breadth of a base" and Jomini's "interior lines." Even these, when actually applied to the defense of an operational theater, have never proved to be absolute and effective. Yet this is where, as purely formal principles, they should be at their most effective ... It is plain that circumstances exert an influence that cuts across all general principles ... We admit, in short, that in this chapter we cannot formulate any principles, rules, or methods: history does not provide a basis for them."\*16

From this passage it is clear that Clausewitz's crisis involved the tri-namic tension between history (change over time), the "influence of circumstances," and the applicability of "general principles" to the conduct of war itself. The undated note, then, reflects his belief that a theory of war was possible; and that, as his list of secondary propositions suggests, it could be found at the level of applied strategy. The remainder of this essay will thus discuss the significance of each proposition.