



## The Relevance of Clausewitz's Theory of War to Contemporary Conflict Resolution

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**Abstract:** This article argues that Clausewitz's writing on war nearly 200 years ago is still relevant for contemporary conflict resolution from at least three aspects: his idea that war is "the continuation of policy by other means"; secondly his analysis of the nature of war and the trinity theory; and finally his understanding of the nature of the strategy. The analysis in this article found that, if there is good policy from which to derive a strategy, and if we are able to apply it efficiently, with support of the people and international community, we have created solid preconditions to win the war.

In addition, Clausewitz's view of the issues associated with war, strategy and conflict resolution is important for understanding the major issues and decision making even while history and reality constrain his abstractions with today's experience. His theories and concepts are as relevant today as they were two hundred years ago. Therefore, the twenty-first century strategists and leaders are recommended to take into consideration Clausewitz's theories on war and strategy because they are still applicable today. In short, Clausewitz is a theorist for the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** Clausewitz, war, policy, strategy, conflict resolution, security.

*It is not what we have thought, but rather how we have thought it, that we consider to be our contribution to theory.*

Tiha von Ghyczy, Bolko von Oetinger, and Christopher Bassford<sup>1</sup>

Carl von Clausewitz has been studied extensively for 150 years by dedicated scholars and is acknowledged to be one of the few truly great writers on war. Many aspects of his ideas and concepts have received much attention in recent years and continue to remain relevant, and are often used in today's doctrines and for civil-military educational processes. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the most important theoretical aspects of war and strategy expounded by Clausewitz, some of which are enduring contributions to contemporary thought and still relevant to today's strategists.

Three crucial points will be used to support this contention. The first point is a conventional reference to his thinking: on the one hand, "war is an extension of policy;" on the other, "war is an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will."<sup>2</sup> The second point relates to his analysis of the nature of war and trinity theory. The final point concerns his understanding of the nature of strategy.

To begin, one may pose a basic question: what are Clausewitz's most important contributions to the theory of war insofar as they are relevant to strategists today? In other words, what can a nineteenth century Prussian general teach a twenty-first century executive or entrepreneur about the theory of war?

Clausewitz applied a scientific, methodological approach to analyzing war in all of its aspects. This article presents and examines his most important and enduring contributions to the theory of war and strategy, and underlines their most important aspects. Firstly, particularly noteworthy is his famous conclusion that "War is merely the continuation of policy by other means."<sup>3</sup> The essence of this theory was Clausewitz's description of the vertical continuum of war (policy and strategy tactics), which he presents in the strategic "ends, ways, and means" paradigm. According to this, Clausewitz explains that "...war in itself does not suspend political intercourse... War cannot be divorced from political life..."<sup>4</sup>

The excerpts above reveal how Clausewitz refers to the political objective of war. This observation accurately captures the key aspect of war: its subordination to politics. Clausewitz's teaching about the relationship between politics and war can therefore be concluded with this summary: "Theory will have fulfilled its main task when it is used to analyze the constituent elements of war..."

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<sup>1</sup> Tiha von Ghyczy, Bolko von Oetinger, and Christopher Bassford, eds., *Clausewitz on Strategy. Inspiration and Insight from a Master Strategist* (New York: John Wiley, 2001), 185.

<sup>2</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 75.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 87

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 605.

Theory then becomes a guide to anyone who wants to learn about war from books.”<sup>5</sup>

Clausewitz sees war as completely subordinate to policy. In *On War*, he explains that “The political object—the original motive for the war—will thus determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires.”<sup>6</sup> In his view, “war is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.”<sup>7</sup> It seems fair to say that this definition remains relevant today, with the caveat that current conflicts include all kinds of asymmetric threats (terrorism, organized crime, drug cartels, and so on.) Clearly, this definition emphasizes the centrality of combat, which separates war from conflict. To support previous points, Clausewitz describes war as “...a clash between major interests, which is resolved by bloodshed – that is the only way in which it differs from other conflicts.”<sup>8</sup> This leads to a clear understanding of the distinction between war and conflict, particularly in today’s contemporary environment in which the threats are often asymmetric threats. However, what differentiates warfare today from the warfare conducted during Clausewitz’s time should be kept in mind. A crucial difference lies in the non-kinetic aspect of contemporary warfare – namely, in information warfare. As a result of globalization and technological development that enables instant messaging over different information platforms, information campaigns have a vital role to play in winning wars by winning hearts and minds, as well as by discrediting the enemy (for example recently in Afghanistan between NATO and Taliban forces).

In history, as well as in the contemporary world and in the future, Clausewitz’s theories of war provide the scientific laws through which one may understand the nature of war. For him, however, war was not an activity governed by scientific laws, but rather a clash of wills or moral forces. Accordingly, the successful commander was not the one who knew the rules of the game, but the one who through his genius created them. This is the theory and philosophy of war that lends his work timeless value.

Clausewitz is further important today because of his efforts to grasp the intrinsic nature of war. His approach, philosophical in its method, is not to be interpreted as a checklist or a quantitative measure on how to address a war. When it comes to an extremely important point, the *morality of war*, Clausewitz says: “the moral factor is the most fluid element of all, and therefore spreads most easily to affect everything else.”<sup>9</sup> No theory could be of any value, he maintains, that did not account for these interconnected elements – the uncertainty of all information, the importance of moral factors, and, lending emphasis to both of these, the unpredictable reaction of the adversary. This

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 97.

is one reason, in Clausewitz's view, why moral forces are so important. As another significant reason for the highest importance of moral elements in war, Clausewitz emphasizes that

They constitute the spirit that permeates war as a whole, and at an early stage they establish a close affinity with the will that moves and leads the whole mass of force, practically merging with it, since the will is itself a moral quantity.<sup>10</sup>

Clausewitz discusses the moral qualities demanded of the troops elsewhere, concluding: "No matter how clearly we see the citizen and the soldier in the same man ... the business of war will always be individual and distinct. Consequently, soldiers will think of themselves as members of a kind of guild."<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, warfare is "Trinitarian." Simply put, it is about people, armed forces, and government.<sup>12</sup> These three aspects are like three different codes of law. Among these aspects, people are the most sensitive in terms of supporting war. Without public support, no war can be conducted successfully. To have their constant support, it is extremely important that the public be well informed in order to be able to judge between "right" and "wrong." Naturally, people's support becomes strongest regarding what is right and wrong—indeed, it becomes completely unquestionable—when they are directly exposed to a threat. This could be any kind of direct security threat to their country that they perceive. However, it must be emphasized that, today, the success of the "trinity" also depends on international support in at least two ways: the legality of the war and international support to the governments in question. The importance of international support could be seen in the case of the USA invading Iraq in 2003, and also in the case of Afghanistan two years earlier.

At this stage, it is worth mentioning Bassford's observations about Clausewitz's trinity model, in which he points out:

Clausewitz's Trinity is all-inclusive and universal, comprising the subjective and the objective; the unilateral and multilateral; the intellectual, the emotional, and the physical components that comprise the phenomenon of war in any human construct. Understanding it as the central, connecting idea in Clausewitzian theory will help us to order the often confusing welter of his ideas and to apply them, in a useful, comparative manner, both to the history of the world we live in and to its present realities.<sup>13</sup>

No one can win war passively; it can only be won actively and decisively. The combination of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic power (DIME) has become essential in the contemporary world. Intelligence is ex-

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Bassford, "The Primacy of Policy and the 'Trinity' in Clausewitz's Mature Thought," in *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 74–90.

tremely important for conducting counterterrorism. It can save a lot of lives, money, and time, as well as ensure initiative against the asymmetric threats arising today. There is no artificial replacement for this trinity of people, government, and military. Rather than attempting to contrast proven theory with modern complexities of conflict and seeking possible discrepancies between the two, the potential manifestations of human behavior in a constantly changing world should be explored more deeply and precisely. This will facilitate a deeper understanding of the nature of modern conflict, in which man is the central actor. There is a tendency to criticize the view of the trinity as the synthesis of three central elements or “dominant tendencies” highlighting that any war is composed of violence and hatred. Regarding the interplay of chance, probability, and the element of subordination, however, the trinity is capable of helping understand the essential dynamics of war even today.

The best path to victory is the so-called *western way of war*, as it calls for the most initiative and decisiveness, and as such has a high chance of success. As Geoffrey Parker sees, this approach to war rests on five principal foundations: “Superior technology, discipline, an aggressive Western military tradition, a unique ability to challenge and respond dynamically, and the capability to easily mobilize capital.”<sup>14</sup> All five of these pillars have continuity throughout history, and consequently have impacted today’s Western militaries. This is clear not only with regard to superior technology and military discipline, but also the flexibility and adaptability of western military structures and organizations in the face of new global challenges. No one could imagine military formations just fifteen years ago that would be successful in today’s conditions of asymmetric war. Though these five principles are considered essential preconditions for success, today’s wars require a rather fine balance between the application of aggressive military strategy and kinetic means with the use of non-kinetic-oriented strategies. This is especially valid in counterinsurgency operations, such as those conducted in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The next important point explains the meaning of strategy. The word “strategy” is often used in a variety of contexts. This term is derived from the classical Greek word *strategia*, the art of the general, or *strategos*. According to Clausewitz, tactics teach the use of armed forces during engagement, whereas strategy uses engagement with the objective of winning war.<sup>15</sup> To clarify this with Clausewitz’s words:

Strategy is the use of the engagement for the purpose of the war. The strategist must therefore define an aim for the entire operational side of the war that will be in accordance with its purpose. In other words, he will draft the plan of the war, and the aim will determine the series of actions intended to achieve it: in

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<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey Parker, ed., *The Cambridge History of Warfare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>15</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 128.

fact, shape the individual camping and, within these, decide on the individual engagements.<sup>16</sup>

The meaning of military strategy sometimes seems to be blurred by continuously appearing in connection with other concepts such as economic strategy, development strategy, the strategy of domination, the prevailing strategy, technological strategy, etc. This begs the conclusion that there are numerous domains of human existence today, all of which require their own strategies. Military strategy requires the continuous development and incorporation of military planners; consequently, military strategists must be familiar with the basic provisions of other strategies in order to face security challenges and, ultimately, win the war. This does not diminish the historical meaning of military strategy – to the contrary, in fact.

Referring to Clausewitz's meaning of strategy in modern times still implies the use of engagement, but with much more attention paid to other domains than in the past. Strategy is less about the simple statement of goals, objectives, or purpose, and more about delineating how those elements are to be achieved in order for a mission to be accomplished.

Strategy is about ends and the means of achieving them; it is concerned with the highest level of planning, with clear end goals, and a broad picture of how to reach them. While losing at the tactical level of warfare does not necessarily mean losing the war, losing at the strategic level most often implies that the war is about to be lost if either the strategy, key officers, or both are not changed: "The original means of strategy is victory [in engagements] – that is, tactical success; its ends, in the final analysis, are those objects which will lead directly to peace."<sup>17</sup> Although we live in the twenty-first century—technologically completely different from Clausewitz's time—his fundamental definitions are still valid.

In conclusion, this paper has argued that Clausewitz's strategy provides a conceptual link between ends and means during peacetime and during war, and his theory of war is still relevant to contemporary strategists. Today there are developments and variations in technology, geography, religion, and politics – factors for which his observations must be adjusted, and with which he would probably agree fully. Although his awareness of the dialectic of war is perhaps too philosophical for some practitioners looking for a checklist to conduct their operations, Clausewitz's overview is important for understanding major issues and decisions even when history and reality constrain his abstractions as they relate to today's experience.

War is seen as a cruel and relentless human activity that is an act of force to bend the enemy to our will, resolved with bloodshed. War is driven by policy and is its organic part. It is caused by interests and the human need for domination as a basic instinct of survival. It is not necessary to have two sides willing

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

to wage war; if just one side wants a physical clash, it will occur; in fact, the initiating side has an advantage, as does the chess player with white pieces.

Likewise, morality is a psychological power that leads toward victory and can be influenced by positive and negative ideology. It can bring either pure and glorious victory or lead to war crimes with a moral alibi. Contrary to morals that help to win, fog and friction are everlasting and inevitable intrusive factors in war. That these factors can be reduced by training, discipline, and high technology leads to a conclusion that more developed nations have a better chance at reducing them.

An essential element of support to the military during war is the backing of the public, which is strongest when it is directly exposed to threat. Only an active and decisive comprehensive approach can lead to victory. In terms of efficiency, the most successful waging of war uses the Western approach with its superior technology, discipline, and aggressive military tradition, along with the ability to respond dynamically and the capacity to mobilize capital. Regarding strategy, it is both an art and a science in using means to reach the ends of policy. Determining strategy is a highly demanding activity for its makers in the extremely complex contemporary world.

Ultimately, if good policy exists from which to derive strategy, and if it is possible to apply it at a high level of efficiency alongside arguments that gain the unwavering support of the people and the international community, there will be favorable preconditions to win a war.

## About the author

Dr. Jasmin Čajić is Colonel and the commandant of the PSOTC in Sarajevo. His previous duties include both command and staff duties from the platoon level all through the MoD of Bosnia and Herzegovina. His educational background includes both military and civilian studies. He is a graduate of the NDU/National War College, Washington DC, USA. He holds the Master of Science of Defense and Security from Sarajevo University and the Master of Science in National Security Strategy from NDU/USA. He received his PhD in Defense and Security from the Sarajevo University, and has received academic title of associate professor (*docent*) at the American University in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He is also visiting lecturer at International Burch University in Sarajevo.  
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