Sketches of Trinity:

Unveiling Clausewitz's Triadic Framework of War

Bernard Brodie famously remarked that Clausewitz's 'On War' is not merely the greatest but the singularly exceptional book on war"[1]

Nevertheless, Clausewitz has long been a divisive figure, with his ideas and concepts sparking enduring debates among influential thinkers. Despite varied interpretations of 'On War,' figures such as Moltke the Elder, Gen. Colin Powell, and Sir Michael Howard have lauded its insights, elevating it to a prominent position in the strategic canon. Conversely, writers such as Sir Basil Liddell Hart, Sir John Keegan, and Martin van Creveld have vehemently criticized Clausewitz, branding him as bloodthirsty, misguided, and obsolete. [2]

The renewed interest in Carl von Clausewitz's theories reflects a contemporary reassessment of strategic thinking. Since the publication of his seminal work "On War" in 1832, Clausewitz's ideas have both influenced and challenged strategic discourse. His assertion that "war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means," [3] underscores the rationalization of warfare as an extension of state policy. Moreover, he defines war as 'an act of violence intended to compel our opponents to fulfil our will.'[4]

Clausewitz's insights endure as a fundamental framework for understanding the nature of war. In an age of rapid technological advancement and shifting geopolitical landscapes, his analysis of the political dynamics of conflict remains invaluable. At the core of Clausewitz's framework lies the Trinitarian concept, which explores the dynamic interplay of passion, chance, and policy.[5]The first of these three aspects mainly concerns the people; the second the commander and his army; the third the government".

Clausewitz's seminal work, "On War," remains a cornerstone in the study of warfare, shaping military thought for generations. Despite its acclaim, his work is often superficially explored, with selective utilization of his ideas. Scholars emphasize the importance of studying "On War" within its historical context to dispel misconceptions.

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[1] 1 Bernard Brodie, 'The Continuing Relevance of On War', in Carl von Clausewitz, On War, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Everyman's Library, 1993), p. 58

[2] Nikolas Gardner, "Resurrecting the 'Icon': The Enduring Relevance of Clausewitz's On War," Strategic Studies Quarterly 3, no. 1 (Spring 2009)

[3] Clausewitz, Carl von. On War. Edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989. Page 87

[4] Ibid. Page 90.

[5] Ibid. 89

Clausewitz's firsthand experiences underscore the nuanced essence of war, encompassing both dread and exhilaration. His writings challenge reductionist interpretations of warfare, demanding careful consideration and contextual understanding. In essence, Clausewitz presents war as a profound phenomenon, offering invaluable lessons for scholars and practitioners navigating modern conflicts.

The Trinitarian concept, central to Clausewitz's framework, offers profound insights into the multifaceted nature of war, challenging simplistic interpretations.

The Trinitarian concept comprises the interactive elements of passion, chance, and policy, aiming to elucidate the complexity of war. However, throughout the history, its interpretation often veered off course. Additionally, Clausewitz mentions a second Trinity involving people, army, and government. This secondary Trinity, thought to encapsulate Clausewitz's understanding of rationality, was construed as validation for his state-centric approach. Aligning the three elements—people, army, government—was seen as the key to Clausewitz's strategic success. Clausewitz elucidates that the trinity can be loosely associated with the dynamic among the populace (representing blind natural force), the military (symbolizing probability), and the government (signifying rationality).

Clausewitz emphasizes that the nexus between war and politics shapes the manifestation of violence. In the absence of political determination (the decision to employ force) and conducive circumstances (such as the availability of troops, weapons, and the likelihood of success), there exists no mechanism to mitigate the escalation of violence towards extremity, as highlighted in his theory of war. . As Clausewitz asserts, strategy entails utilizing engagement towards the war's objective. Violence serves as a coercive instrument—a means to achieve political goals. This does not imply that force stands as the sole coercive tool accessible to political entities; rather, it underscores the political sway over the utilization of force

defending Clausewitz's Trinitarian model, scholars have unearthed a fundamental tension within his theory. While Clausewitz famously regarded war as instrumental, a "continuation of politics," his Trinitarian analysis appears to overshadow war's political rationale with the competing elements of the formula. The non-linear aspects of war represented by the Trinity seem to constrain Clausewitz's core message of war's political instrumentality. While the Trinity enhances understanding of war's complexity, its detachment from the political context that animates it risks misinterpretation. There's a danger that the Trinity, in its current form, devolves into yet another prescriptive model, divorcing war from its political essence. This contradicts Clausewitz's stance; while war should be conceptualized as interactive, it must always be anchored in its political context.

Raymond Aron perceives the aspect, war in the service of policy, as the overarching principle of the entire structure. To him, the Trinity validates the supremacy of policy.[6] Peter Paret appears to echo this perspective, suggesting that Clausewitz centers politics in his analysis of the "total phenomenon" of war[7].

[6] Raymond Aron, Penser la guerre, Clausewitz (Paris: Gallimard, 1976),141
[7] Peter Paret, Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 168.

However, this interpretation overlooks the essence of the triadic construction, wherein war's political role is just one of three "dominant tendencies" at play in conflict. The centrality of the policy element is diminished, constantly contested, restrained, or supplanted by two other forces wielding equal potential for dominance. Considered on its own, the trinity has often been a source of both confusion and clarity. At first glance, it may seem overly simplistic, lacking precision, and even a bit peculiar. However, as noted by Hugh Smith, while Clausewitz 'nowhere discusses passion, reason, and chance at length, these elements permeate his entire work.[8]. One could argue that he indeed explores these elements extensively, albeit not always explicitly within the context of the trinitarian framework. As Christopher Bassford accurately argues 'the Trinity is the concept that ties all of Clausewitz's many ideas together and binds them into a meaningful whole.[9]

It's worth noting that some may perceive the trinity as aloof and analytical, portraying war in a manner that fails to capture its grim essence. Nevertheless, Clausewitz remained acutely mindful of the grim realities of war throughout his works. He wasn't an advocate for militarism, even though he acknowledged war as sometimes necessary and potentially involving significant bloodshed:" *Kind-hearted people might of course think there was some ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed, and might imagine this is the true goal of the art of war*"[10]

He viewed war not as a trivial pursuit or a source of delight, but as a solemn endeavor with grave objectives. He emphasized the futility and moral wrongness of turning a blind eye to the true nature of war due to discomfort with its brutality. Clausewitz's grasp of war was nuanced, shaped by his experiences as a soldier, which underscored its intricate and often misunderstood character to those who hadn't encountered it firsthand.

At the end of Book One, chapter one, Clausewitz discusses the remarkable trinity:

War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case. As a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always make war a remarkable trinity, composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.[11]

Clausewitz's use of the term 'trinity' should not be confused with its theological meaning; however, such a reading may aid our comprehension. In general usage the term refers to a group of three closely related things. Clausewitz wants to go further than this and, although not intending to imply any divine meaning, analogically, comparison with the Holy Trinity usefully stresses the inherent unity constituted by the three elements. An analysis of the nature of war that eschews any one of the tendencies will be 'totally useless,' much as the nature of the Godhead cannot be truly understood without reference to Father, Son, and

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[8] Hugh Smith, On Clausewitz (New York: Palgrave, 2005), p. 116.

[9] Christopher Bassford, 'The Primacy of Policy and the Trinity in Clausewitz's Mature Thought', in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 75.

[10] Clausewitz, Carl von. On War. Edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989. Page 75

[11] Ibid. Page 89

Holy Ghost. This emphasis on the 'integrative interrelation of all phenomena' was common to German idealism, which had a significant impact on Clausewitz's thought, particularly towards the end of his life.[12]

In conceptualizing the trinity, Clausewitz aimed to articulate the fundamental components that constitute war's essence. He delineated war as a synthesis of three core elements or dominant tendencies. These encompassed the primal forces of "violence, hatred, and enmity,"[13] representing an innate and relentless impulse; the realm of "chance and probability," where creativity finds expression amidst uncertainty; and the aspect of "subordination to policy,"[14] where rationality governs its purpose and direction.

These elements have been summarized in various shorthand versions such as "violence, chance, and politics," "hostility, chance, and purpose," or even as "irrational, non-rational, and rational factors." Throughout this thesis, these fundamental elements will primarily be referred to as passion, chance, and policy/politics.

Clausewitz's trinity encapsulates the multifaceted nature of war, acknowledging its chaotic, unpredictable, and rational dimensions. It serves as a framework for understanding the complexity and dynamics inherent in armed conflict, highlighting the interplay between instinctual drives, creative adaptation, and strategic intent.

Clausewitz's concept of war as comprising passion, chance, and policy can be likened to three distinct codes of law, deeply ingrained in their respective domains yet characterized by variable relationships with each other. Ignoring any one of these elements or attempting to impose a fixed hierarchy among them would severely depart from reality. Such an approach would render the theory ineffective and irrelevant in understanding the complexities of warfare.[15]

Thomas Waldman introduces a categorization scheme for understanding the trinity's components. This classification delineates the objective, subjective, and contextual dimensions of the trinity. At the core of this typology are passion, chance, and politics, comprising the primary or objective trinity. These fundamental elements find expression in societal structures: the populace, the military commander and his forces, and the government, respectively. Waldman elucidates that these societal elements form the secondary or subjective trinity. Meanwhile, the contextual dimension represents a third tier. Unlike the trinity, context isn't composed of three elements but rather establishes the backdrop against which the other levels of the trinity operate and interact. The functionality of the trinity as a system is intricately tied to its contextual backdrop, underscoring the importance of understanding the conditions that shape it. Contextual factors are indispensable for comprehending shifts that occur at the secondary level and for grasping the inherent adaptability and responsiveness of the trinity.[16]

Clausewitz's principal work remains incomplete, a universally acknowledged aspect that grants leeway for varied interpretations. This incompleteness affords the opportunity to meld concepts from disparate sections of the text in bolstering arguments. For instance, Clausewitz briefly delves into the Trinity, initially

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[12] Gat, Azar. A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War. Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 232

[13] Clausewitz, Carl von. On War. Edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989. Page 89

[14] Ibid. Page. 89

[15] Ibid. Page. 89

[16] Waldman, Thomas. War, Clausewitz, and the Trinity

leaving certain aspects open to inquiry. However, within another section, he unequivocally posits that war serves as an extension of politics, with politics wielding paramount influence. Hence, the author somehow resolves the debate regarding the supremacy among these three elements, notwithstanding the initial assertion of their equality. Ultimately, Clausewitz concedes the indisputable ascendancy of politics over war. We see, therefore, that war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means.[17]

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[17] Clausewitz, Carl von. On War. Edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989. Page 87