

Published in
Military Strategy Magazine, Special Edition, The Continuing
Relevance of Clausewitz

Strategy, War, and the Relevance of Carl von Clausewitz

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The article discusses the continued relevance of Clausewitz's main lines of thought. The author argues that On War introduces five interrelated basic ideas (Hauptlineamente), which offer a timeless method to develop military strategies since they shape how to think rather than what to think about war. Using these lines of thought, the article offers a structured approach to developing a war plan.

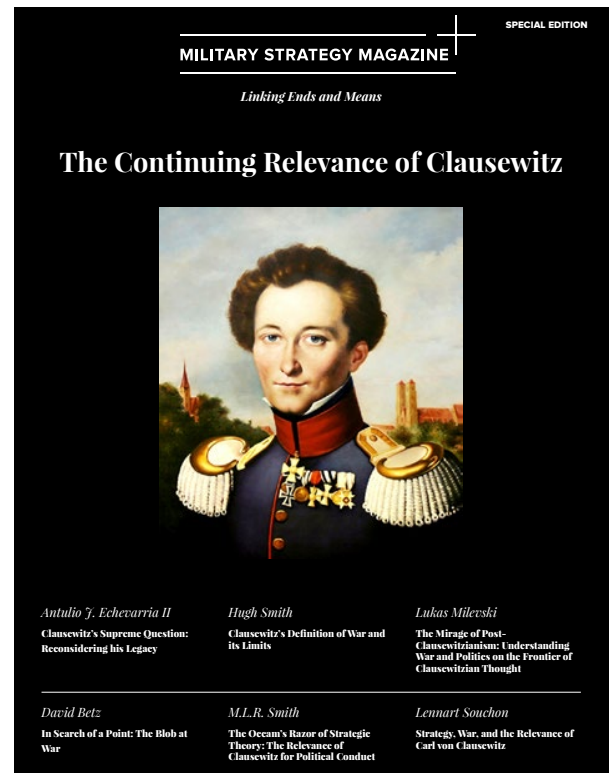
To cite this article: Souchon, Lennart, "Strategy, War, and the Relevance of Carl von Clausewitz," *Military Strategy Magazine*, Special Edition, "The Continuing Relevance of Clausewitz", December 2020, pages 33-37.

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Special Edition, The Continuing Relevance of Clausewitz



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About the author

Lennart Souchon is a German strategist and scholar of political philosophy and military theory. He was the Director of the International Clausewitz-Center at the Military Academy of the German Armed Forces from 1999 to 2018 and founded the Clausewitz Network for Strategic Studies in 2008. He also served as Director of Studies at the German Federal Academy for Security Policy Study and is a senior member of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London. Furthermore, Souchon is an Honorary Professor at the University of Potsdam, Germany. His research focuses on strategic studies and strategic theory of the Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz.

Strategy and Clausewitz

Wars undergo a process of tectonic decentralization and globalization accompanied by revolutionary technological capabilities. The 21st century requires a strategic understanding of high-risk conflicts against vicious adversaries in a frictional environment.[i]

Strategy is a discipline of abstract thinking and a practical art. It requires the decision-maker to combine systematic thinking, political purposes, military means, and people with each other in such a way as to maintain the ability of self-determination and achieve essential overarching purposes in the face of resistance and friction. A *military strategy* is an architectural keystone that enables the government to exert a guiding influence on the armed forces with regard to warfare. Clausewitz uses the term *war plan* synonymously with *military strategy* to refer to a mechanism that links the government with the commander and his forces.[ii] Due to the primacy of politics, a war plan defines the objective of the use of military force and determines the appropriate means for achieving it.[iii] Networked competencies and holistic synergetic thinking and action in near-real time will help develop strategies in the future.

In an age of global information networking, one must develop approaches that allow strategic decisions to be made on a specific event in a short amount of time. This calls for high-level decision-makers to stay closely connected with military commanders and to be able to apply a systematic approach. The courses of action that are available to react to security threats range from demonstrative observation to major combat operations, serving a clearly defined purpose and are resourced with the required means. Assessing complex security situations, developing a grammar of war, drawing up war plans that encompass the entire act

of war are the multi-layered benchmarks of this challenge.

Carl von Clausewitz's theory offers an intellectual foundation for the development of strategic thinking and action. One can comprehend the essence of strategy best by applying the basic features of Clausewitz's lines of thought. To emphasize this point, Clausewitz's *basic ideas (Hauptlineamente)* are of pre-eminent importance to think about war.[iv] This article shows that these timeless lines of thought assist in grasping the essence of wars in the 21st century.

Prior to any operational planning, a thorough analysis within the framework of the Fascinating Trinity is necessary. This work requires a good understanding of the complex challenges, recognizing their basic features, identifying tendencies, and assessing strengths and weaknesses compared to an assertive belligerent opponent has to be done. Friction, probability, and chance, which alter the planned course of wars considerably, must be given just as much consideration as the meandering stages of development, as they turn from confined, short-term interventions into simmering unresolved conflict or military firestorms. Conclusions such as whether an action

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is to be taken and with what intensity must be laid down in a war plan.

In the fog of war, commanders' decisions have considerable impact. They pursue the political purpose with a blend of reason, disposition, and in combination with the virtues of their forces. Coordination at the international level should not begin until the national level has comprehended an imminent war and has adopted a clear standpoint based on a transparent rationale. The public discourse and the struggle for the authority of interpretation in the mass media and cyberspace are essential benchmarks that one must consider.

This article has the objective to introduce Clausewitz's basic ideas – strictly oriented on his original work “Vom Kriege”[v] – as guiding theory for the renaissance of the strategic culture and as a foundation for the education of up-and-coming creative, knowledgeable and experienced future commanders.

Clausewitz's Basic Ideas

Reality is the starting point and the end of every Clausewitzian analysis. It does not confine itself to the character of war but also analyses human factors, the commander's moral qualities, and the army's virtues.

As used by Clausewitz, the term *war* describes a state that is initially characterized by a duel.[vi] At the combat level, the interactive process of imposing one's will on the opponent, who, in turn, wants to do just the same, is seen as an interaction between two strategic wills in the context of the *Fascinating Trinity*. In accordance with Hegel's logic of essence, this is the pith of what Clausewitz merges in the *Fascinating Trinity* to form a synthesis of his ideas.

What is unique about Clausewitz is that he reckons that the opponent will act rationally in his rationality and be an equal match in the dynamics of war.

The basic ideas of war drawn in his work are the *appropriateness of means*, the relations between the *purpose, objective, and means*, as well as *probability, chance and friction*, the *commander's genius*, and the *military virtues of the army*. The *Fascinating Trinity*, one of the “consequences for theory,” is included at a higher level as it enables us to make an initial differentiation and identification of its major components.”[vii]

In an initial step, – see Figure 1 – one has to study through the *Fascinating Trinity*, those factors, and their properties that significantly affect the war's character and direction see Figure 1.

Step 1: Holistic estimation of the strategic situation regarding each warring party individually in its *Fascinating Trinity*, then in comparison with those of the others and finally from a third-party perspective.

Step 2: Analysis of the political purposes and capabilities of the individual warring parties in assessing the *appropriateness of means*. The *decision to go to war* or not is formulated.

Step 3: Defining the purposes, ultimate and intermediate objectives and courses of action and specification of the means along with the relations between *the purposes, objectives and means* in conjunction with the definition of the combat power and sustainability required by the armed forces and of interfaces to civilian and other actors.

Step 4: Estimates of the *frictions, probabilities, and chances* likely in a planned war and discussion of courses of action and suitable alternatives.

Step 5: Summary of the results in a *war plan*.

Figure 1: Agenda for a war plan oriented on the basic ideas (Hauptlineamente) of Clausewitz

The Exegesis of the Fascinating Trinity

The *Fascinating Trinity* is an epistemological research method that enables a holistic understanding of the conflict situation. It combines the characteristics of war and the actions in it in a three-dimensional space and leads from Clausewitz's philosophical reflections to the reality of action in which the opposing forces, sustained by their political wills, interplay freely – within living action–reaction – in a frictional environment. It transforms the hierarchical relation of politics and war into an objective space of action in which three independent variables determine war: its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to *reason alone*, a *blind natural force* composed of primordial violence, hatred and enmity, and the *play of probability and chance* within which the creative spirit is free to roam.

In this way, Clausewitz condensed his basic ideas about war into three independent tendencies. Thus, the theory of war is **floating** (*schwebend*) in a three-dimensional field of force of specific characteristics and tendencies.[viii] Clausewitz writes a “systematic theory of war, full of intelligence and substance,”[ix] which goes far beyond the rational nature of an instrument of policy and defines its inherent characteristics. In the *Fascinating Trinity*, he captures the essence of the unpredictability in war, which is of timeless validity.

The following interpretation of his theory of war floating among three tendencies stands out from the other interpretations to date. It represents the independent tendencies of war as a three-dimensional system in which each tendency corresponds to one dimension. This view allows the quantification of the theory of war in accordance with its particularities and to picture it as free-floating in a three-dimensional space. Figure 2 defines the three dimensions as the X, Y, and Z-Axis[x]:

- **X-Axis:** The commander and his army master the aspects of probability and chance. The advent of the creative spirit in armies' leadership may change, limit, or eliminate it as the war progresses.
- **Y-Axis:** War is a rational instrument and the responsibility of the government. The superordinate position of this instrument is qualified antithetically in that it is represented as one of three equivalent axes in a tripolar system.
- **Z-Axis:** Primordial violence acts as a blind natural force and is hence firmly rooted in the people's character. It is either unleashed in a war characterized by violence, hatred, and enmity or causes the tension to abate due to its manifestation as an absolute longing for peace and stoic forbearance.

Fascinating Trinity - a three-dimensional System

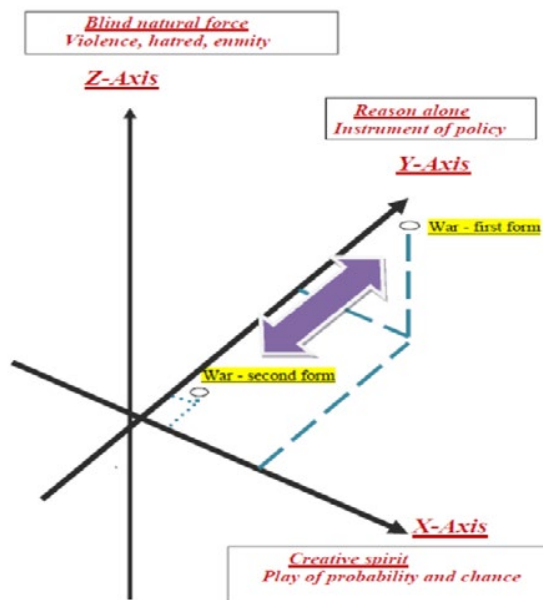


Figure 2: The Fascinating Trinity in Three Dimensions[xi]

Representing the trinity in a three-dimensional space opens up new dimensions for understanding it. Clausewitz took the theory of war from the cause and effect level and created a holistic ambit as an analytical tool. The three-dimensional representation of a war's course permits visualization of the dynamics that lead to different types of

war based on specific tendencies, intensity level, and the resulting transformations, i.e. long wars (first form) vs. short wars (second form).

The *Fascinating Trinity* must be applied to each belligerent separately, then analyze it as a whole and finally assess how it bears relation to oneself. An assessment of the primordial violence inherent in one party's people compared to that inherent in an opponent must include the characteristics, histories, religions, cultures, and traditions of both peoples. Comparing their way of dealing with probability and chance with that of the opponent shows a party its options. The ability to conceive the trinity in a three-dimensional system helps analyze the origins and characteristics of war and their dynamic interactions in quantitative and qualitative terms.

A theory of war floating between the three tendencies reveals a state that can change quickly and significantly under the pressure of events. Political decisions are made along the principal axis of *purpose, objective, and means* and are quantifiable by measuring the *appropriateness of means*.

Appropriateness of Means

The *appropriateness of means*[xii] allows us in step two to evaluate the tendencies and characteristics of the *Fascinating Trinity* and to reveal whether it is prudent to wage war and what means are required to do so. To determine appropriate options, it is necessary to compare the political purpose, the states' strength and situation, the government's character and capabilities, the armed forces and the people with that of the opponent, and finally examine possible effects on third-party states. The comparison must also address the assumption that the opponent will make precisely the same evaluation, determining the means he sees as appropriate and acting equally to make the most of his strengths. The appropriateness of means quantifies courses of action, capabilities of the armed forces that are to be employed, and the necessary effort. It connects the purpose with the possible courses of action, that is to say, with the strategy. This is, in turn, the basis from which to derive the war plan. Weighing this up is a creative activity critically shaped by the qualities of mind and character of the men taking the decision, statesmen and commanders alike. This relationship may change significantly in the course of a war and must be re-gauged and adapted accordingly. Bringing the war to a victorious end requires a continuous evaluation of the enemy.

The result of this comparison enables an informed decision on whether or not to start a war and, if so, on what strategic course to take it. A genius's highly developed mental aptitude is needed to sift out the most relevant findings from the plethora available. According to Clausewitz, the next step of this analysis concerns the interplay between the purpose, objective, and means and aims at gauging the

required resources to accomplish a political purpose.

Purpose, Objective, and Means

The relationship between *purpose, objective, and means*[xiii] links in step three the superordinate political purpose, the military objective, and the necessary efforts that have to be made. It has a logical, limiting effect on the interrelations that otherwise would tend to extremes. Any change in the objectives and means during the war can also modify the purpose.

The establishment of the relations between the purpose, objective, and means is a rational categorization process to enable the complexity of war to be comprehended. Built on the *appropriateness of means* and established within the *Fascinating Trinity*, they offer a system for strategic thought to link the political will with military means in the war plan based on reason rather than passion. Hence, they are an essential part of a war planning process covering all the forms in which war can manifest itself and limits the courses it can take.

Before deciding to wage war, it is necessary to answer the questions of what is to be achieved *by* it (purpose) and *in* it (objective) [xiv]. These central issues determine the scale of means and energy necessary. It is irresponsible to start a war without conducting a rigorous analysis of its *purpose and objective and the means* required.

Frictions, Probability and Chance and Moral Factors

Following this establishment of the vertical context is examining the unexpected events and *frictions* in step that can arise and hinder or even prevent the pursuit of the war's objective. One must, therefore, closely examine the course of action planned for the war and plan alternatives.

Probability, chance, and the opponent's actions cause military operations to divert from the original plan and lead to considerable friction during the war. While this friction can radically change the course of a war, it simultaneously creates room for maneuver for the commander that he can exploit. If the fighting is intense, chequered, and protracted, the political purpose usually changes and hence its dominating influence on the action taken. Frictional

difficulties become increasingly frequent, and unexpected room for maneuver arises. It takes these extreme conditions to bring out the commander's true moral quality and his army's virtues.

The *moral factors* are a decisive aspect of warfare. They are the product of the commander's genius, the armed forces' military virtues, and the people's characteristics. Genius is the quality that enables a commander "in reducing war's many complexities to simple, yet accurate expressions." [xv]

War Plan

The war plan defines in the final step the political purpose and the operational objective for the planned act of war. Clausewitz writes in Book Eight: "War plans cover every aspect of a war, and [...] must have a single, ultimate objective in which all particular aims are reconciled." [xvi]

A war plan only makes sense if it balances military means with all aspects of a civil society that is well-informed and actively participates in the discourse on security.

Conclusion

Clausewitz's theory offers an intellectual foundation for coping with the fundamental changes in warfare since its main lines of thought provide a framework of how to think rather than what to think. Clausewitz's work "is an *education course*, creating clear concepts, allowing the spirit of things to be grasped in the inner correlation and offering valid insights, in other words, *a basis for judgment*." [xvii] His epistemological and action-oriented basic ideas allow war's fundamental features to be analyzed and enable informed and deliberate decision making.

The synopsis of the characteristics of war is the core element of Clausewitz's lines of thought. It proceeds from theoretical war, floating within the *Fascinating Trinity*, to war in reality and enables the rationality of the *purpose, objective, and means* to be adapted hermeneutically in the face of *friction* and emphasizes the importance of emotional factors for the overall course of a war. Clausewitz's work is a premise for a renaissance of strategic thinking and action. It provides intellectual guidance for understanding the essence of war as a whole and for finding individual strategic answers in the 21st century.

This article is based on the book:

Lennart Souchon, Strategy in the 21st Century. The Continuing Relevance of Carl von Clausewitz. ISBN 978-3-030-46027-3 (Cham: Springer Nature, 2020).

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