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
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effect on public opinion, and the un-
certain political capabilities and limits of
future war.

Given the extent of such change,
the thought of Carl von Clause-
witz, developed one hundred and sev-
enty 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 oppo-
nents...” Thus the core of Clausewitz’s
philosophy of war—that states wage
wars using armies in pursuit of politi-
cal objectives—will disappear. Yet some
think that nuclear weapons, transna-
tional constabulary warfare, anti-ter-
rorism, counter-narcotrafficking, and
despite technological changes from RMA
his conception of war remains valid

greater compartmentalization among political and military leaders render obso-
te the Clausewitzian definition of war as an act of policy and his tri-
partite concept of war. Moreover, the
relevance of On War’s apparent sus-
ceptibility for not addressing war as a cultural
phenomenon: it not only fails to ex-
plain why wars occur, it views war from the perspective of the Western
countries-state paradigm. However, such
arguments fundamentally misunder-
stood what Clausewitz meant by poli-
tics. In fact, despite technological
changes introduced by RMA—as well as those brought about by nuclear
weapons—his conception of war re-
stands valid.

In Search of Politik
Clausewitz’s description of war as a
“continuation of politics (Politik) by other means” is well known but unfor-
tunately 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 ambi-
guity of the term Politik, which means
both policy and politics. But Clause-
witz also deserves some blame for re-
eglecting to define in simple language
how this multivalent term was to be understood. German scholars and sol-
diers alike have puzzled over that since
the last century. Eberhard Kessel ar-
gued, for example, that for Clausewitz
Politik consisted of subjective and ob-
jective 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 politi-
cal interrelationships unique to a given
time and place.

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 pol-
icy, 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 inter-
action between key
decisionmaking institu-
tions and the personali-
ties 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 princi-
pally 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 tem-
pation to read no further, for while it
might appear that the essence of Clause-
witz’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. Thus, individuals seeking a
“genuine understanding of Clausewitz
cannot escape the task of actually read-
ing On War.” 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. Clausewitz is
often clearer when read in German, but
the prerequisites for understanding this
great theorist are really patience and a
will to reflect.

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 influ-
ence of politics on war. They also dis-
close that his military thought was be-
coming 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, val-
ues, 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 in-
telligence or product of pure reason: It
is “an art in the broadest meaning of
the term—the faculty of using judg-
ment 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 sin-
gle individual or not.” States or soci-
eties were not limited in form to
monarchies (constitutional or abso-
lutist) and semi-rigid social hierarchies

Photo: Climate and Health Foundation
characteristic of his day, but "deter-
mined by their times and prevailing
conditions." A state, for instance, can
be a united, sovereign entity, a "person-
fied 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 Euro-
politically institutions (for instance,
armies and command structures) have
"differed in the various periods." In
fact, in his later books Clausewitz uses
the term political to mean all institu-
tions, procedures, philosophies, and
values of the military as a community.

Clausewitz employed several his-
torical 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 pro-
foundly similar wars of conquest and
plunder carried out by semi-nomadic
Tartar tribes and those of expansion pro-
cuted by Napoleon's armies. Selecting
the Tartars as an example of politics di-
recting war is significant, for some
would claim that their "tribal soci-
eties" fall outside the Western nation-
state paradigm.9 Tartar tribes origi-
nated in Central Asia along with other
Turkic peoples. In the 12th and 13th
centuries they were overtaken by Mon-
gols and mixed with them. They par-
ticipated in Mongol invasions of east-
ern Europe and the Middle East.10 They
eventually converted to Islam and
joined in Ottoman Ilahi (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 infi-
dels, to kill enemy leaders, and for
entertainment—all motives for future
war as cited above. Yet, such motives,
as Clausewitz knew, were shaped by re-
sources available to the Tartars, their
governmental role as a composite of
Turkish and Mongol nations located in
Central Asia, their nomadic culture and
traditions, and the religious influ-
ence of Islam. These factors all fell
under the rubric of political forces in
Clausewitz's mind.

While the Tartar system of formu-
laing 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 ex-
ample, Clausewitz's use of Politik af-
ords both a transhistorical and tran-
scultural perspective on war, one that
at the same time respects historical
and cultural uniqueness. Thus the ele-
ments that shape policy are both situa-
tional and cultural, objective and sub-
jective (or rational, nonrational, and
irrational according to political-scienc-
tic 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 understand-
ing of what Clausewitz meant by Politik,
we can examine his tripartite concep-
tion of war in some detail. This "remark-
able or paradoxical trinity," as it has
been called, is Clausewitz's framework,
or model, for understanding the change-
able 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."13
They, in turn, correspond to three repre-
sentative 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 rele-
ant to future war. Technology does
not require adding a fourth component
to the trinity, squaring the triangle, as
has been suggested.14 Technological ad-
vances 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 sub-
jective as well as objective natures. The
former consist of war's means. Since
they vary over time and place, Clause-
witz dubbed them subjective. The lat-
ter, on the other hand, embrace ele-
ments of violence, uncertainty, chance,
and friction; and while embodying many
varieties and intensities, they re-
main a constant part of war despite
time and place. Moreover, because war
is not an autonomous activity but a so-
cial and human event, it has two ten-
dencies, escalation and reciprocation.

Absence the moderating influence
of policy and debilitating force of
friction, these tendencies push war-
fighting toward a violent ex-
treme. Thus, for Clausewitz war
might change color like a chameleon,
but its essential nature remains con-
stant—violent, unpredictable, and
prone to escalation. Technology, in fact,
resides in all elements of the trinity without altering
their inter-relationship. Military tech-
ology, 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 mil-
tyary corner of the trinity, their compo-
nent technologies (such as microchips)
usually originate in the private sector.
Indeed, technologies related to com-

communication 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
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gical advances. The evolving infor-
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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 decision-making, 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. 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. 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. 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, as some claim. 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 retaliation in the 1950s to flexible response in the early 1960s, for instance, shows how Politik affects war even in the nuclear age. Since 1945 policymakers have had to respond to changing situations, growing strike and counter-strike 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 patiently conspired to force the avoidance of nuclear war.

Clausewitz’s thought does not insist that warfare serves a purely rational aim

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. 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. 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 for example. But his conception of war, his remarkable trinity, and his grasp of Clausewitz’s day. They saw politics as a social-Darwinist struggle for national existence that demanded war be waged to the utmost. It also appears in Ara Gat, The Origins of Military Thought from the Enlightenment to Clausewitz (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 253–63.


10 Jerome Cimbala, Nuclear Threats from Small States (Carlisle Barracks, PA.: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 1994).