

# THE NATURE OF WAR-UNCHANGING IN THE FACE OF SHIFTING FORMS AND MATERIAL DIMENSIONS

By MAJ Paul Lye Chee Wei

## ABSTRACT

The essay comprises two central arguments—first, the fundamental concepts of war have endured and are still applicable today; and second, the way in which wars are being conducted is constantly changing and adapting based on context. The writer focuses on the Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz’s book, *On War*, written in 1832, as an important source of introduction to war, strategy, concepts and the psychological effects of war. The writer argues that the nature of war has not changed in the 188 years since *On War*. In the essay, the writer discusses the key principles on the nature of war based on Clausewitzian theories. He then compares these principles against the works of two notable academics who advocate war’s evolution—Mary Kaldor and William S. Lind. The writer highlights that while their ideas certainly do represent the current context of war to a fair extent of accuracy, they do not in fact necessarily contradict the theories found in *On War*.

*Keywords: Multi-faceted; Act of Force; Conquest; Inextricably; Trinity of War*

## INTRODUCTION

War as a subject of study is perhaps the most researched mass human activity in history. There are countless number of books, articles, journals, reports and miscellaneous documents written on the topic of war by a wide spectrum of authors. Decorated war heroes have provided insights based on their experiences on the field while scholars have analysed the decisions and actions of political leaders to understand their psyche. Among the multitude of publications, the Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz’s *On War* stands out as the most prominent piece of literature. It was written after the Napoleonic wars, and was first published in 1832. Till today, it is widely considered as one of the most important books ever written about war and strategy. However, many modern thinkers have challenged the concepts described within, arguing that they are controversial, outdated, and narrowly-conceived—therefore holding little relevance to the complex and multi-faceted conflicts of today.

The topic of this essay essentially addresses this divide, arguing that the nature of war has not changed in the 188 years since *On War*. In this essay we will first expound the key principles on the nature of war based on Clausewitzian theories, then we compare this against



*A Portrait of Carl von Clausewitz while in Prussian service, by Karl Wilhelm Wach.*

the works of two notable academics who advocate war’s evolution—Mary Kaldor and William S. Lind. We will then see that while their ideas certainly do represent the current context of war to a fair extent of

accuracy, they do not in fact necessarily contradict the theories found in *On War*.

At this point, it is useful to distil the essay topic down to a more comprehensible manner. Merriam-Webster defines the noun 'form' as 'the shape and structure of something as distinguished from its material.'<sup>1</sup> The term 'material dimensions' refers to the physical manifestation or existence of something intangible like an idea or even religion. The form and material dimensions of war can therefore be interpreted as how wars are conducted, which includes the actors involved; the weapons or equipment used; the methods or tactics employed; and the chosen medium. On the other hand, its nature refers to the 'what' of war. Basically, this essay comprises two central arguments—first, the fundamental concepts of war have endured and are still applicable today; and second, the way in which wars are being conducted is constantly changing and adapting based on context.

## CLAUSEWITZIAN THEORY

*On War* was segmented into eight volumes which were termed as 'books', and coincidentally, Book One was titled *On the Nature of War*. The analysis of Clausewitz's work within the scope of this essay will be based entirely on Chapter One of Book One. To focus on such a small portion of the literature may seem insufficient or lacking in depth, but it must be emphasised that in this chapter Clausewitz described in great detail his interpretation of exactly what war is, and its purpose; and that all the other concepts he subsequently discussed in later chapters were in essence based on the key ideas espoused in Chapter One. Another point worth noting is that, in their attempts to disprove Clausewitzian theories, both Kaldor and Lind concentrated their efforts on the writings in this chapter as well.

## War Defined

Clausewitz defined war as 'an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will,' and 'merely the continuation of policy by other means.'<sup>2</sup> From this, we understand that war is functionally a political tool used for the attainment of a political objective. Policy permeates all aspects of war and has a continuous influence on it. Even if thousands of people engaged in

armed conflict, it would not be considered war if the fighting lacked a political aim. The political intent must always be present, otherwise it would just be called something else.<sup>3</sup> Clausewitz even goes as far to suggest that political leaders used war merely as a means to win a bargaining chip to be used in negotiations towards a peaceful solution—that conquest and holding of territory was not necessarily war's ultimate objective in itself.

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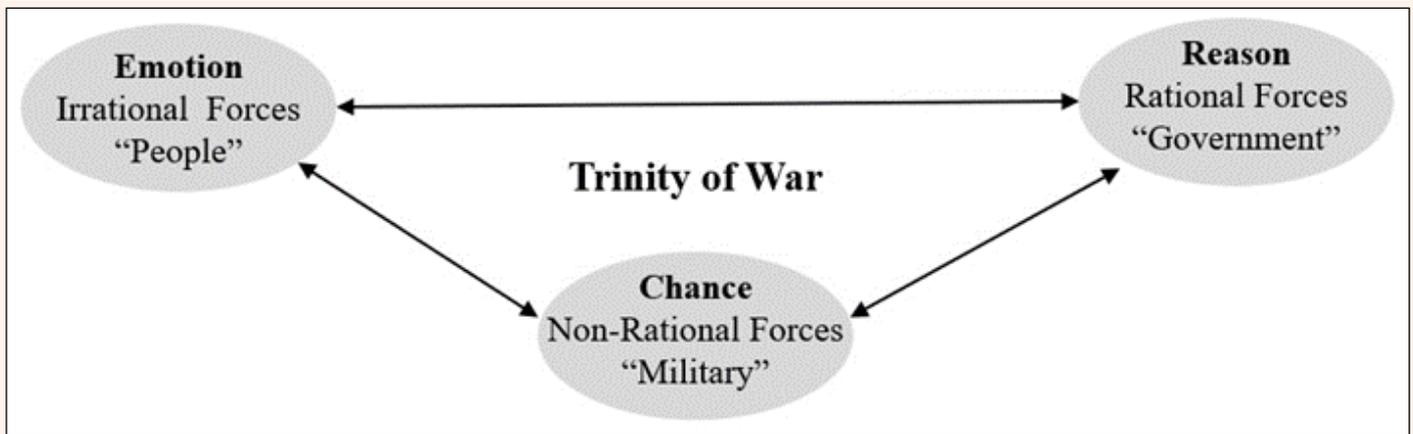
## Ideal War Versus Real War

The Prussian General conceptualised the 'ideal' war, one which involved the 'utmost use of force and exertion of powers'. This hypothetical ideal type of war would have no limits on the levels of violence and would aim to completely destroy the enemy.<sup>4</sup> Clausewitz clearly explained that this was purely a theoretical concept, and proceeded with clarifying what war would be in reality. Real war is 'never an isolated act' that springs up accidentally. Instead, it is triggered by the culmination of prior tensions between states. Real war is made up of successive acts of violence—it is simply not plausible that a state would be able to concentrate all available resources into one single blow. Real war is not always fought until one side wins, instead, military action is limited to only achieving the political leaders' objectives. From his statements about real war, we can see elements of clear thought and logic being involved on the part of the states' leaders. Most importantly, the point that Clausewitz asserts by comparing the two is that war in reality is a rational act.

## The Trinity of War

Clausewitz famously likened war to a chameleon. However, the point he was trying to bring across was that instead of simply being able to adapt to its surroundings, war was in fact highly complex and inextricably depended on three elements—emotion, chance, and reason.

In describing the first element as 'primordial violence', Clausewitz was not referring to the physical act of violence, but rather the violent emotions that



*Clausewitz's Trinity of War*

exist in human minds. His point here was to highlight the influence that human emotion had on war. Considering the full range of human emotions—such as fear, hatred, anxiety, jealousy or joy—we understand that this element does not employ logic or rational thought and is therefore commonly referred to as the Irrational Force acting on the trinity.

The second element of ‘chance and probability’ seeks to describe conditions in reality. A commander may bring the perfect plan into battle, but actions on the ground will invariably be influenced by unforeseen hindrances on the battlefield itself. This element emphasises the factors that are beyond human control and is therefore seen as the Non-Rational Force.

The third element describes how war is a subordinate to policy, and therefore is a consequence of reason and rational thought. Although at first glance this element seems to simply reiterate that war is an instrument of policy, Clausewitz established the deeper understanding that policies were articulated by leaders based on their interpretation of national interests. This was therefore the antithesis of the first element, focusing on the aspect of human reasoning and logic on war. Scholars also identify this element as the Rational force in Clausewitz’s trinity.

To aid the reader in understanding this trinity, Clausewitz related the three elements to the people, the military and the government respectively. These three segments of society were later interpreted by some as the elements which formed the secondary trinity.<sup>5</sup> The important takeaway here is that Clausewitz used these terms as examples for the purpose of illustration only, and never in his writings did he profess that the people, military and government together

actually formed the trinity.

In summary, Clausewitzian theory condenses the nature of war to the following two points: (1) war is always a rational act driven by policies; and (2) all three elements of the trinity will always exist in every armed conflict.

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## NEW WARS

Mary Kaldor is a British academic who first coined the term ‘New Wars’ in her book *New and Old Wars*. In it she describes how the end of the Cold War initiated the demise of interstate war, and a conversed rise in conflicts resulting from civil strife instead. She defined New Wars as ‘the wars of the era of globalisation.’<sup>6</sup> She observed the decline of the state as result of them opening up to the rest of the world; and the blurring of lines between state and non-state, public and private, economic and political, and even war and peace. Kaldor argues that the logic of New Wars is clearly distinct from those of the Old Wars in four main areas: the actors involved, the intended goals, the methods used, and lastly the forms of financing.<sup>7</sup>

Kaldor elaborates that states are no longer the primary actors in war, having been replaced by non-state actors like private security contractors, mercenaries, jihadists and paramilitaries. These combatants do not fight each other in a decisive manner

and conflicts no longer revolve around attaining a specific military victory. She adds that these non-state actors are not driven by traditional political goals and instead use war to meet their local cultural or religious needs.<sup>8</sup> Some may even seek to prolong the state of conflict just to glean lucrative economic benefits.<sup>9</sup>

## Out with the Old, In with the New?

Kaldor's thesis has done well in recognising the evolution of warfare and relating its context to the modern environment; and in appreciating the dangers posed by failed states.<sup>10</sup> Her descriptions of how war is now being waged are indeed accurate in certain specific areas, but there are several criticisms to be made. For example, there is nothing 'new' about intercommunal strife. Historical evidence shows that it was already prevalent in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and before, so to characterise this as a key feature of New Wars is a fallacy.<sup>11</sup> Kaldor's awkward attempt at relating New War theory to the 2003 Iraq War is another instance where she falls short. She implies that the United States (US) could have avoided war completely had they instead sought negotiations with Saddam; and that the main motive for the invasion was to '... keep alive an idea of old war on which America identity is based.'<sup>12</sup> To assume that state leaders would commit to war solely for the purpose of preserving an ideology which defined their people is simply preposterous.<sup>13</sup>

Further, Kaldor's allegations that Clausewitzian theory are no longer relevant were very much a result of her own misinterpretations. She dismisses the trinity of war based on its secondary construct with two main arguments. Firstly, that it is now increasingly difficult to distinguish between combatants and civilians and therefore the institutions—the people, military, and state—which form the trinity is no longer applicable. Secondly, as wars are waged by non-state actors, the entire element of rational forces is removed and is instead driven only by irrational human emotions. However, as earlier pointed out, Clausewitz does not specify the socio-political nature of the entities involved in war and only cited those three terms as examples.<sup>14</sup> The three core forces exist independently of the state structure, and still apply to both state and non-state players.<sup>15</sup> Specifically, the Irrational and Rational Forces will always exist within the combatant's mind. A

jihadist's emotions likely involve a sense of oppression and heroism, just as he reasons that self-sacrifice would further the cause of his religion. Likewise, a mercenary's greed and low regard for human life allows him to reason that killing another to achieve his employer's intent is a perfectly acceptable way to earn a living and improve his own status in life. Whether these emotions or reasoning are sensible to an outsider is completely irrelevant. The fact that they do exist reaffirms Clausewitz's ubiquitous trinity and definition of war.

## GENERATIONAL WARFARE

American strategic theorist William S. Lind, alongside four officers from the US Army and US Marine Corps, first proposed the framework of Generational Warfare together with the term 'Fourth-Generation Warfare' (4GW) in a 1989 Marine Corps Gazette article titled *The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation*. The team charted out four distinct generations of war, each with its own set of unique characteristics. The theory was later elaborated on in 1994 and 2004 where Lind endeavoured to validate the framework by applying it to the Iraq War; and juxtaposed it against Clausewitz's trinity in an attempt to give it more academic credibility.

The first generation runs roughly from 1648 to 1860, beginning with the Treaty of Westphalia which Lind interprets as the point in which states were given the monopoly to wage war. In this generation, wars were fought using line and column tactics.<sup>16</sup> The primary weapon used by soldiers was the musket. The second generation starts around the time of World War One (WWI), its principal difference from first generation war was the shift towards indirect fire tactics as a result of advancements in weaponry—in particular, the introduction of artillery capabilities. The huge increase in firepower notwithstanding, the first two generations reflected very little evolution in the thinking behind how to execute war. They clearly remained as wars of attrition, the eventual victor being the side with deeper resources. Third generation war was eminent in World War Two (WWII), characterised by the German 'Blitzkrieg'. Although weapons did continue to modernise, the focus had now shifted from firepower to manoeuvre; the main driving force was therefore the advancement in ideas and tactics, not technology.

# TRANSFORMING THE SAF

The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) adapts to evolving security threats by setting its sights on next-generation capabilities.

**The 1st Generation SAF (1960s to 1970s)**

The SAF began with just two infantry battalions, two wooden ships and no air force and an urgent need to provide for Singapore's security. A basic, credible conscript force was set up with the introduction of National Service, which also served to instil a sense of patriotism and cohesion.

**The 2nd Generation SAF (1980s to 1990s)**

The SAF shifted to a concept of "Manoeuvre Warfare" capable of conducting forward defence and achieving a swift and decisive victory. This meant developing strong capabilities and fighting systems in the Army, Navy and Air Force.

**The 3rd Generation SAF (2000s onwards)**

The SAF is in an advanced stage of its third generation transformation. It is a networked force that is adopting Enhanced Detection, Precision Strike, Rapid Manoeuvre, Improved Force Projection and Unmanned Systems capabilities to deliver a decisive edge in war. It is also a flexible force that is capable of a full spectrum of operations, responding flexibly to various threats from peace to war, including the conduct of Operations Other Than War and Counter-Terrorism operations.

**STRONG CYBER DEFENCE**

The Defence Cyber Organisation will be set up to strengthen our cyber defences. It will lead cybersecurity operations, strategies and developments, and include the Cyber Defence Group which will manage the 24/7 defence of the SAF's military networks.

**SMART DEFENCE**

In line with the Smart Nation initiative, the SAF will invest in dedicated labs and gain deep expertise in Robotics, Artificial Intelligence and Data Analytics to increase the SAF's effectiveness in operations.

**STRENGTHENED TRAINING & NS**

The SAF will enhance the National Service (NS) Training System for the next lap of NS, supported by advanced simulation and training instrumentation in next-generation training facilities like SAFTI City and Instrumented Battle Circuits.

**Next Gen SAF**

The SAF will continue to be an effective military force and provide a strong defence against aggression. With the changing nature of conflict, the SAF will adapt to the evolving security environment by investing in the key enablers above.

Transformation of the SAF through the Generations.

We are currently in the fourth generation, which sees the most radical change since the first one. We have returned to a world of clashes between cultures and irregular conflicts, just as it was before the first generation. Non-state entities have re-emerged as opponents in war through insurgencies. Lines between peace and war, civilian and military are blurred. Terrorism as the new form of warfare bypasses the military completely and targets civilians directly. As such, states struggle to effectively employ their military capabilities which allegedly operate based on the outdated doctrines and principles from previous generations.<sup>17</sup> Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW) also incorporates the use of new technologies such as robotics, remote piloted vehicles and artificial intelligence.<sup>18</sup>

In brief, Lind asserts that warfare has evolved from the use of massed manpower, to firepower, to manoeuvres, and now to insurgencies.<sup>19</sup> Lind's follow-up to his original work—which related these theories to the Clausewitzian trinity—proclaimed that 4GW, and indeed all future wars, would be categorically 'nontrinitarian'.<sup>20</sup>

## 4GW Supplants the 3nity?

The Generational Warfare framework does a decent job of bringing out key features of war during specific periods in history, but that is all it manages to achieve. There are numerous criticisms to be made against it—the deductions are mostly flawed and its interpretations of reality too generalised. For example, to define the start of the first generation based on the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 wrongly assumes that war did not exist before this time. Its selective use of historical references is baseless.<sup>21</sup> Its division of warfare into definable linear stages is inaccurate and there is no proof that any generation had evolved to the next.<sup>22</sup> Throughout the periods confined within the first three generations, non-state actors continued to participate in acts of war which contradicted Lind's assertion that the state held a monopoly over war.<sup>23</sup> The misguided use of the term 'Blitzkrieg' implies to the reader that the Germans had conceived of this superb plan to outmanoeuvre the Allied Forces, when it was just a natural progression in the development of their tactics. Ultimately, Lind's thesis is defeated when it equates different manifestations of war to the birth of new and distinct generations of armed conflict.

Lind's attempts at dispelling the Clausewitzian trinity further exacerbates the weaknesses of Generational Warfare. He replicates Kaldor's misunderstanding of Clausewitz's theories by associating elements of the trinity with specific societal entities. He claims that throughout history, wars were mostly 'nontrinitarian' since they were waged between families, clans, tribes, cities and even commercial enterprises; and that this trend would continue under 4GW with terrorism at the forefront.<sup>24</sup> In stark contrast, the war on terror exhibits all of the forces in the trinity. Terrorist groups are inherently hostile which reflects the irrational side; the success of their operations continue to be largely affected by non-rational forces; and their jihadists objectives are rational materialisations of their faith.<sup>25</sup> Again, 4GW's flaw in reasoning lies in its inability to critically comprehend theory.

## THE INFALLIBLE TRINITY

As we can clearly see, war has not changed; although the tools, methods, and perceptions of war have.<sup>26</sup> The New War theory and the Generational Warfare framework merely reflect contextual specifics and the current configuration of war's underlying and unchanging elements but show no evidence of any change to the nature of war.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, these academics who refute the theories in *On War* appear to do so based on questionable grounds. Colin Gray summed it up best in his book *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare* with the following phrase:

*"Some confused theorists would have us believe that war can change its nature. Let us stamp on such nonsense immediately. War is organised violence threatened or waged for political purposes. That is its nature. If the behaviour under scrutiny is other than that just defined, it is not war."<sup>28</sup>*

The nature of war, as described by Clausewitz, is just as relevant in analysing modern unconventional conflicts as it is for reviewing traditional interstate wars throughout history. The trinity offers insights to understanding war and helps us clarify this difficult subject. It also serves as a strong theoretical framework through which war can be studied.

## Know the Trinity, Win the War?

Clausewitz's trinity is indeed evergreen, but that is not to say it is without limitations in its utility to practitioners of war. By its construct, the trinity can only be applied retrospectively to events that have already happened. This means that the trinity cannot be used to predict combatants' future tendencies, nor foretell what form war will take tomorrow. For example, the element of chance warns that a multitude of factors will disrupt even the best of plans, but offers no clue as to what these factors will be or how to overcome them. In this same light, the trinity is not instructive in formulating winning strategies. Although Clausewitz did highlight supplementary strategical aspects to consider in the later chapters of *On War*, these similarly remained descriptive in nature. Another limitation to highlight is that Clausewitz never did specify any clear relationship between the three elements of the trinity. It is understood that all elements would always co-exist with varying degrees of influence, but how a change in one of the elements can affect another remains unexplained. Does a highly emotive soldier therefore become less rational? Is a highly educated state leader necessarily less prone to irrational thought? The trinity is adequate at highlighting the factors which impact a course of action, but has no ability to deconstruct how that decision was reached.

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Military professionals and strategists must be cognisant of these limitations, or risk overestimating the usefulness of Clausewitz's trinity. It would be a fool's task to use these theories when conceptualising campaign strategy, projection plans or manoeuvre tactics. The key takeaway here is that the human factor remains the most important to success. Leadership, morale and military instinct must prevail when faced with irrational forces on the battlefield. The focus for military leaders should therefore be on ensuring that their soldiers are adequately trained and equipped with the necessary skills to adapt, innovate and make the best of every situation.

## CONCLUSION

War is inexplicably complex, but Clausewitz's enduring fundamental definitions have aided us in comprehending its intricacies. We can plainly see how the form and material dimensions of war have constantly evolved, but at the same time understand

that its basic nature has essentially remained unchanged—attempts to prove otherwise have thus far been unsuccessful. However, caution must be taken in applying its principles. The trinity is not all-encompassing. It serves mainly as a tool to reflect and analyse, not a guide to formulating strategy.

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