Clausewitz and the Non-State Actor: A Contemporary Application of the Paradoxical Trinity to Countering Terrorism

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Although far from a contemporary theory, Clausewitz's trinity reflects a nuanced approach in determining strategic intervention points in countering terrorism.

In his seminal work, **On War, Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz contends that war is a paradoxical trinity**, metaphorically suspended between three phenomena, namely primordial violence (or the indelible passion of people), the play of chance and probability, and the subordination to government policy (89). In describing war in this fashion, Clausewitz envisioned two large forces engaged in large-scale warfare within the context of a defined battlefield as a matter of both custom and government policy. While today's warfare is distinctly less symmetrical than that of Clausewitz's experiences, his trinity still holds great relevance today despite the contemporary rise of non-state actors. Underpinning this conceptualization is the assumption that war is non-linear; Clausewitz's trinity inherently delineates intervention points for countering terrorism in its recognition that warfare, be it waged by state or non-state actors, involves the interplay between people, probability, and policy. As such, counter-terrorism policy-makers can strategically apply the trinity in a holistic sense through concurrently locating the people, or terrorists themselves, removing chance when possible to increase the probability of success, and de-legitimizing the policy that purports terrorism.

In describing the human aspect of his paradoxical trinity, Clausewitz states that war is composed of, **"primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as blind, natural force (89)."** There is no truer example of such characteristics than the contemporary non-state actor. In accounting for the role of the person in Clausewitz's trinity within the context of countering terrorism, efforts must therefore involve an understanding of both the psychological and strategic mindset of the terrorist. In being compelled to **act by psychological forces while also following logical processes** (25, 7), terrorists provide locative information, or identifiable tracks, through the factors that draw them to terrorism and the mechanisms that enable them to do so. By acknowledging that individuals are in fact **psychologically drawn to the path of terrorism** (25) in order to commit violent acts, the focus becomes locating recruiting mechanisms that traumatize individuals to **produce a dissociative state** (86), thus leading individuals to identify with terrorism. The susceptibility of individuals to this transformation largely revolves around existing social milieu or environmental factors, indicating an accurate set of intervention points to apply the "people" branch of Clausewitz's trinity in countering the threat of terrorism.

A contemporary applicable example is a **2006 study of Chechen suicide terrorists that found that all of the terrorists studied had experienced deep personal trauma directly increasing their vulnerability to recruitment and implanting a desire for revenge** (429, 454-455). Also, the Southeast Asian terrorist

group **Jemaah Islamiyah has been known to recruit young Muslims who express a desire to both increase their religious knowledge and gain a sense of fraternity and companionship** (15). Because, as found by noted psychologist Albert Bandura, **radicalization often instills a sense of moral rightness in a terrorist cause while providing social rewards** (186) in combination with a chance for revenge and sacrifice, identification of susceptible populations is essential in not only locating possible terrorists but also the mechanisms that facilitate their entry into terrorism. Although not speaking to the art of countering terrorism, Clausewitz accurately identifies that warfare inherently involves the passion of the individual and in so doing, articulates a contemporary pressure point in the nation's largest threat.

While locating the terrorists themselves is an essential component in accurately applying Clausewitz's trinity, a true application must also account for the role of chance and probability in warfare. As Clausewitz posits, the nature of warfare also involves, **"the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam [the scope of which] depends on the particular commander and the army (89)."** It follows, therefore, that in countering the threat of terrorism, one can decrease the role of chance and the probability of success by limiting terrorists' maneuver space and, in effect, tightening the noose of containment where they indeed operate. While operationally confining terrorists to specific geographical boundaries is impossible, terrorists must organize, train, and operate, regardless of who composes the "commander or army."   In so doing, they often seek, and at times, enjoy the benefits of sanctuary and terrain that **allow them to operate undercover from conventional targeting methods**. Such examples include pre-9/11 al Qaeda in Afghanistan or al Shabaab in Somalia. Terrorism thrives within safe havens and enabling regimes that facilitate terrorist activities so in accurately identifying such geographic regions, those countering terrorism can facilitate containment draw chance closer to their efforts.

In addition to accounting for chance by containing known threats in safe havens, policy-makers can further mitigate the role of chance by filling partner nation gaps through multilateral capacity-building. Numerous partner nations have demonstrated sub-optimal counter-terrorism capabilities often allowing maneuver space for terrorism. In countries such as the Philippines, for example, terrorist activity is a constant problem because of **limited financial resources, gaps in law enforcement coverage, and a lack of cooperation between agencies**. However, since the addition of a U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF), as well as numerous diplomatic and financial aid entities, **terrorist groups such as Abu Sayyaf have largely been confined to specific regions and have incrementally withdrawn from many areas in which they used to operate**. As such, through U.S. advisory and assistance, the threat has been isolated while gaps in indigenous operational coverage have been narrowed. The end result has been an increase in successfully countering terrorism. In concert with geographically confining non-state actors, building capacity in nations can effectively decrease terrorists' chances for success through limiting a terrorist commander's options while concurrently decreasing his probability of success. Again, Clausewitz accurately depicts, albeit not in the sense he envisioned, an intervention point in countering a threat that was non-existent during his time of conflict.

Finally, in describing warfare as, **"merely the continuation of policy by other means (87),"** Clausewitz precisely identifies a key tenet of terrorism defined by terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman as **violence or the threat of violence used and directed in pursuit of or in service of a political aim (2-3).** In viewing terrorism as policy within the context of the paradoxical trinity, another intervention point becomes apparent. Specifically, to apply the trinity to countering terrorism, policy-makers must de-legitimize terrorism as a successful policy choice and present a better option. Such de-legitimization includes facilitating ideological responses that can more effectively garner popular support while concurrently disrupting operations. Through an ideological approach, the goal would be similar to the counter-subversion effort detailed by David Kilcullen whereby, **"the aim is not to arrest or kill adversaries, but to convert them—not to destroy the enemy, but to win him over (658)."**

Through exploitation of terrorist strategy and their governing policies, insight can be gained into points of ideological intervention that may have an effect on recruiting, operating, and facilitating. Such intervention points include social and economic development policies where, in Northern Ireland for instance, **the result was the emergence of a new middle class whose mediation networks helped stem violence**. While not a panacea, development programs, as an example, can offer alternate outlets for possible terrorist recruits and successfully decrease violence through producing better options for individuals.

Another example of a state swaying a populace to a more palatable policy is the government of Singapore, which counters terrorist ideology through **the use of reformed detainees, societal cohesion programs, and religious rehabilitation, programs** that directly apply to culturally diverse and densely populated areas such as Southeast Asia. Efforts such as these are only possible through taking a holistic view of counter-terrorism policy that can disrupt terrorist efforts without sacrificing popular support in presenting policy options. Indeed, in utilizing counter-terrorism efforts as the means behind Clausewitz's **"continuation of political intercourse (87),"** popular support is a prerequisite in presenting an alternative to supporting terrorism. As Kilcullen states:

> **By using trusted networks of partners—focusing on a "careful nurturing of local contacts and personal relationships" with those who oppose the enemy, and working to support them, extend their influence, and protect them from intimidation—one gradually restructures the social environment so as to deny the enemy a role in it. Such an approach treats the destruction of opposing subversive networks as a secondary, defensive activity, designed to create a breathing space in which the construction of friendly, trusted networks can proceed (660).**

Therefore, in de-legitimizing terrorism through alternative intervention strategies with respect to both terrorist networks and the population within which they exist, nations can counter the threat of terrorism both operationally and ideologically and present better options for susceptible persons. A policy in stark contrast to terrorism must be considered the endstate to accurately counter terrorism for, as Clausewitz states, **"The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose (87)."**

Though written well before the threat of terrorism, Clausewitz's *On War* is still quite relevant today in that it inherently prescribes an approach to countering terrorism through the recognition that warfare, regardless of the combatants or nature of combat, exists within the context of a paradoxical trinity. It accurately depicts intervention points in the current effort to quell the threat of non-state actors. Specifically, its contemporary application indicates that efforts should be made to identify the people that are drawn to terrorism and locate them, decrease the role of chance through geographically containing terrorism while strengthening global capacity to limit its maneuver, and present an alternate policy to terrorism by de-legitimizing it. While Clausewitz's goal was to develop a theory that balances the three, a modern application would be the development of a strategy that holistically accounts for all three in an attempt to concurrently sway the factors in one's favor. For as Clausewitz so eloquently asserts, **"A theory that ignores any one of them or seeks to fix an arbitrary relationship between them would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless (89)."**

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