

# **CAN THE CLAUSEWITZIAN PARADOXICAL TRINITY HELP US UNDERSTAND BETTER THE CENTER OF GRAVITY CONCEPT?**

by Panos Mavropoulos

## **Introduction**

Thirty years or so after the revival of the concept of the center of gravity in the American military literature, the international military community still tries to interpret the teacher's writings on the subject, with no success whatsoever. Judging from the number of papers published, it is more than obvious that the essence of the concept has not been grasped properly by theoreticians and practitioners alike.

The problems surrounding the center of gravity cannot be summarized better than the way it was done by the British scholar Stuart Kinross: "There is no consensus [in the Western profession of arms] as to whether the centre of gravity is a source of strength or a source of vulnerability; Nor is there any agreement on whether the centre of gravity is singular or whether it resides in several sources; nor is there any realization as to whether it is applicable across the spectrum of conflict or only applies to wars designed to overthrow the enemy completely."<sup>[i]</sup> It seems that we can ignore the first question, because a possible answer would create more problems than it would try to solve; we will call it a naming convention and we will care less if it is a source of strength or vulnerability as long as it abides by the fundamental criterion; does it bring a decisive effect? As for the second question, the center of gravity is preferably one, though more than one could be identified in cases where the enemy is not coherent, there are more than one theaters of war, the enemy forces are dispersed, etc. The third question applies only to the sort of war intended to overthrow the enemy; starting from there, we can always try to apply it to other types of war, such as low intensity conflicts, terrorism etc, while at the same time keeping our prospects moderate.

## **Types of war**

In line with the last question, the problem does not seem to be the concept itself; this could be resolved. The problem is more serious; we fail to grasp what constitutes win in today's conflicts. One thing we learned lately is that military victory doesn't mean achievement of the political aim of the war or in other words "...bringing about the complete collapse of an opponent might not serve one's political purpose ...".<sup>[ii]</sup> This is a fundamental failure of strategy, be it grand or pure military. The highest, the far reaching work of "strategos" (the general) is the identification of the military aim, through which the political aim tasked will be achieved. It is funny how short our memory is; the mistakes of Suez (1956) and Vietnam were repeated in Iraq and Afghanistan, albeit in a more benign form. As Echevarria notes "The validity of the theory of center of gravity has never been systematically challenged."<sup>[iii]</sup> Then we come back to "the central question about 'COG analysis': can a nineteenth century approach to warfare be applied beyond large-scale conventional military operations to embrace twenty-first century irregular conflicts with all their attendant civil-military complexities?<sup>[iv]</sup> (which in fact is Kinross' third question rephrased). The short answer is 'yes'; despite the difficulties of applying the concept of center of gravity "in areas beyond the realm of decisive operations"<sup>[v]</sup>, we still need to agree on a methodology, even in broad terms, to identify the center of gravity. This would help us to better understand the concept, especially in the context of the contemporary conflicts.

## **Methodology**

The obvious problem practitioners have to deal with is that there is no practical methodology for the identification of the center of gravity. Clausewitz “[a]t no point in *On War*” provides “a prescriptive methodology for how best to determine centers of gravity in war”. [vi] He “... offered examples of centers of gravity (an army, key leaders, a capital or an alliance) but not an objective methodology for identifying them.” [vii]

It is very sad for the concept itself, but the reality is that the prevailing-- methods are either the “guess and debate” method [viii] using as a starting point examples of centers of gravity used in the past (i.e., the capital, the armed forces, the will of the people, etc.) or in the absence of an agreed solution (proposal) the “contest of wills is often decided by whoever is the strongest personality on the planning team, not through any established analytical process”. [ix]

The methods proposed in the past by Strange, [x] Eikmeier [xi] and Warden, [xii] have not been accepted widely and are therefore of limited usage.

That might not come as a surprise though to war professionals, analysts or practitioners. War is a complex endeavor; there is no super-computer to replace the commander; neither a mathematical representation of the decision making process, that could be implemented by a piece of software. War, with all the scientific bits and pieces it incorporates, is first and foremost an art, and a very demanding one, that puts under stress the highest qualities of the human nature. The identification of a single “point” in the opponent’s structure, the elimination or neutralization of which would, hopefully, bring the war to an end, is not that simple and easy endeavor.

## **The trinity and its relevance to contemporary war**

In this paper we posit that the center of gravity is a theoretical construct and its practical value is rather limited. Its value stems rather from the process of analyzing the enemy than from the outcome itself, which anyway would almost always be controversial. This paper proposes the connection of the two Clausewitzian concepts, namely the center of gravity and the paradoxical trinity, in an effort to introduce a rough methodology for identifying the center of gravity through the application of the analytical tool of the trinity to the intended opponent under consideration.

One of the concepts introduced by Clausewitz in his monumental work “*On War*” and survived until today, is the paradoxical or remarkable trinity. In a text of about 300 words, Clausewitz presented his trinity, a group of three interdependent elements that impact decisively the development and the outcome of war. As Christopher Bassford [xiii] notes, “[i]t represents his thinking at its most mature and sophisticated level” and therefore it is “best understood as the theoretical capstone of Clausewitz’s entire work ... that makes it such a valuable, if complex, analytical tool”. Michael Howard, on the other hand, proposes that the trinity “... would be a good place for any contemporary strategic thinker to begin”. [xiv]

The remarkable trinity, in the words of Clausewitz himself, is “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. The first of these three aspects mainly concerns the people; the second the commander and his army; the third the government. ... Our task therefore is to develop a theory that maintains a

balance between these three tendencies, like an object suspended between three magnets.”  
[xv]

### **The Clausewitzian trinity as base for a methodology to identify centers of gravity**

Ignoring polemics of the trinity such as John Keegan and Martin van Creveld, and based on the wide acceptance of the concept, in order to win the war we should, at the highest level of the war effort, aim at tipping the balance by attacking one of its elements.

Analyzing the elements of the trinity in an effort to devise our strategy to attack them, we realize that they are not all equal in value. The subordination of the military (army) to the government has never been (correctly) seriously challenged. The political leadership, be it democratic or other, is therefore in control of the military. Even in those rare cases of the past where the two powers were incarnated in the same person, the political decisions were made by that person in its capacity as a political leader. Though in the course of history there had been voices for the opposite, the government retains its political authority to guide all issues related to war, even during the conduct of military operations. The basic tool to do that is the political aim, which is amended according to developments in the general security environment and/or the theater of operations.

The government, on the other hand, acting on behalf of, and having been empowered by, the people, is the ultimate authority making decisions for all internal and external state affairs, including issues related to war. Therefore, though the political power rests with the people, practically it is expressed by the authority representing them. In the overall war equation, the government, representing the rationality, is the ultimate authority to decide the continuation of the war or its submission to the opponent's will, based on an assessment of the general situation (military, diplomatic, economic). As a result, the ultimate center of gravity for the belligerents is the respective governments or other political authority (for political entities other than states); our war effort should aim at influencing its will to continue the war.

The next step is to devise a way to attack the identified center of gravity. In this particular case, the target can be attacked either physically or morally (psychologically).

A rather obvious choice in this case is the physical dimension of the attack, namely the elimination of the head of the government by a “decapitation” operation, as was the case of Saddam Hussein of Iraq and Kaddafi of Libya, which gave rise to a whole “leadership targeting school” as one of the four schools of air power.[xvi] This strategy though depends on the type of the regime, and might be suitable in cases as Iraq or Libya, but it is of limited effectiveness in the case of democratic regimes. The “leadership targeting” strategy, as much as it may be desirable and attractive in the sense that it could bring the war to a short conclusion avoiding expenses in both material and souls, is rather difficult to implement even for countries with practically unlimited means like the US. Smaller powers and small states would definitely have to plan for alternative “ways”.

Attacking the moral of the enemy political leadership is obviously more complicated. Moral in general, being intangible, cannot be attacked directly, and therefore we should look for an indirect approach. The indirect attack can be implemented through an attack against other means, which in Jominian parlance are called *decisive points*, and which could more appropriately called *intermediate points*. In our case, these points are the other two elements of the trinity, namely the Army and the People, which form a dipole within the trinity. The two interdependent poles of the dipole (or the “two inseparable factors viz. the total means at his disposal and the strength of his will” in Clausewitzian parlance [xvii])

represent the overall capacity of the state to wage war. The first one, the Army, represents the capability of the enemy to wage (or continue) the war, while the people express the will of the state to support the cause of the war. In conducting war the government is based on this dipole. It is the government though that holds together the capabilities (which in addition to the military include also economic, diplomatic and information) and the will of the people to support the war. Therefore, to influence the will of the government we should attack either its capabilities or the will of its people.

Attacking the opponent's military capabilities means resorting to the traditional war intended to deprive the enemy from its most valuable and decisive means in conducting the war. This type of strategy, in Delbruckian terminology, is very well known as *annihilation*. Destruction or neutralization of the military capabilities is a way to attack, as a second order effect, the logic of the government. The moment the government recognizes that its military capabilities are inadequate to continue waging the war or even its probabilities to win it are seriously undermined, then most likely the decision will be made to submit to our will.

The will of the people can be attacked through an information operation combined with the destruction of the military and economic capabilities. The erosion, destruction or neutralization of military capabilities, apart from affecting the rationality of the government, affects at the same time the moral of the civilian population by eroding its confidence in the capabilities of the army to provide it with the required protection. A very common, well known and appreciated way to erode the moral of the people is to resort to a protracted war intended to *exhaust* the enemy, either militarily or economically. The protracted war should be conducted with caution though as not to exhaust our economy and/or undermine our people's will before that of our enemy. This depends primarily on the cultural background of the people, as was the case in Vietnam where the protracted war affected first and more the American people vis-à-vis the Vietnamese. The erosion of the moral of the people undermines its will to support the cause of the war, resulting in the exertion of pressure from the people to the government to come to terms with the enemy, before it is too late.

The aforementioned rough analysis though is nothing more than the normal analysis conducted at strategic level for the purpose of planning and prosecuting the war. In the process of this analysis, the identification of the center of gravity does not add anything revolutionary significant, which would radically change the war planning. To put it in a different way, history has seen commanders in chief that successfully conducted their campaigns without being aware of the concept. The practical contribution of the concept to the war planning "...is simply to assist practitioners in focusing their efforts and resources",[xviii] and therefore should be rather considered as a *focal point* [xix] for the war effort to be directed against.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is about time to bring back war to its proper dimension; war is an affair of the state; it is planned and conducted by the political authorities; the military should only concern itself with the relevant military operations. Therefore, the center of gravity should be sought at the highest level of planning and conducting the war, which by definition is the governmental one. In this context, in our top-down approach, the overarching center of gravity of the enemy is the will of its political leadership as the ultimate authority to make all relevant decisions about the war; since the will of the political leadership is intangible and therefore difficult to attack, our approach should be planned through the decisive (or intermediate) points of the military capabilities and the will of the people. Any other center

of gravity that might be identified would be just a decisive point, which is elevated at the center of gravity status, because the direct attack against the government might not be an option. Further analysis at lower levels would reveal more decisive points; the lower the level of analysis, the more tangible the decisive points would be. In this approach, in attacking the will of the government, the diplomatic, economic and informational elements of power of the state are of paramount importance.

In our minds, there is no doubt that the concept of center of gravity is applicable to the good old Trinitarian war, the type which Clausewitz had in his mind when he proposed it. But since 2/3 of the wars after 1946 have been low intensity conflicts, [xx] its validity has been questioned, not unfoundedly. Today's security environment is a context radically different from that of the traditional Trinitarian war. The new types of war, i.e. terrorism, soft security, etc, are not the appropriate context for the existence of a center of gravity, or the possible center of gravity might be of a complete different nature, not suitable to be attacked by military means. For instance, Al Qaida's center of gravity, certainly not being Osama bin Laden (the death of whom did not cause the complete defeat and disintegration of the organization), even if identified would require policy measures that would have nothing (or at most very little) to do with military capabilities.

As a final and concluding thought, we would make our military lives much easier by using the concept loosely, as is currently done at the tactical level, as a *focal point* [xxi] for the war effort to be directed against.

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