Introduction

Athanassios Platias*

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As Thucydides claimed, the events of the past, "will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future."[1] His *magnum opus*, therefore, was meant to have a lasting significance ("was done to last forever"),[2] not merely as an account of the war, but as a source of generalizations about state behaviour in the context of changing political and security challenges. The *History of the Peloponnesian War* "lasts forever" not only because history repeats itself, but also because this text sharpens the reader's outlook and enables him or her to analyze and respond to current experience.

Louis Halle did not exaggerate when he claimed that "Thucydides, as he himself anticipated, wrote not only the history of the Peloponnesian War. He wrote the history of the Napoleonian Wars, World War I, World War II, and the Cold War."[3] Despite the recent discussion concerning the alleged "discontinuities in international politics"[4] and the "transformation of world politics"[5], it is difficult to disagree with Robert Gilpin when he states that "international relations continue to be a recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in a state of anarchy. The classic history of Thucydides is as meaningful a guide to the behaviour of states today as when it was written in the fifth century B.C.".[6]

It comes therefore as no surprise that most international relations scholars tend to begin their books with such phrases as: "ever since Thucydides"[7] or with references to Thucydides as the father of realism.[8] Indeed, Thucydides is regarded as the founding father of political realism, the dominant approach in international relations. Yet, in modern Greece the study of Thucydides has been relatively neglected. The purpose of this thematic issue of

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Études helléniques/Hellenic Studies is to correct the situation by presenting the contribution of Greek scholars to the study of Thucydides. These scholars come from various disciplines, and reside both in Greece and abroad.

The papers included in this volume touch upon seven themes that are central to the current debate in the field of international relations. These themes are :

1. Causes of the Peloponnesian War.
2. Relative distribution of power between Athens and Sparta.
3. Polarity of the Greek city-state system.
4. Nature of political realism.
5. Nature of the strategy in Thucydides' *History*.
6. Nature of the Athenian imperialism.
7. Pathology of war.

Let us summarize each one as a general introduction to this volume.

I. Causes of the Peloponnesian War

First and foremost Thucydides is categorical on this issue:

> I propose first to give an account of the causes of complaint which the Athenians and the Peloponnesians had against each other and of the specific instances where their interests clashed: this is in order that there should be no doubt in anyone's mind about what led to this great war falling upon the Hellenes. But the real reason for the war is, in my opinion, most likely to be disguised by such an argument. What made war inevitable was the growth of the Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta.[9]

However, Thucydides' ambition to determine once and for all the causes of the Peloponnesian War has not been achieved, since the dispute about these causes continues to this day. In this volume, as well as in the rest of the literature, opinions fall into two extremes: a) Some scholars support Thucydides' argument of the "real reason for the war" being "the growth of the Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta". For example, Platias' contribution in this volume reflects this point of view. b) Other scholars give primary attention to "the causes of complaint" as Thucydides calls them and claim, for instance, that Pericles' handling of the Megarian Decree was misguided and

responsible for the war. Indeed, we can infer from Thucydides that this issue was central in discussions in Athens on the eve of the war. Conventional wisdom of Thucydides' day held that the Peloponnesian War was provoked by the Megarian Decree. Aristophanes made this point clearly in *The Acharnians.* Arnopoulos, in this volume, refers to the views of Aristophanes: "His vitriolic attack on demagogues was especially directed at Pericles and his party, whom he held responsible for the war. As a result, he applauded another playwright, *Eupolis*, who went so far as to suggest that Pericles should be tried as a "war criminal" (*Poleis*).

Another point of view is presented by Boucoyiannis in this volume. She focuses on "the big influence of small allies" and argues that Corinth dragged a reluctant Sparta into the war. As she puts it: "it was minor allies, rather than the major states in the bipolar system of the Greek world that engaged in power politics and tipped the system into conflict. Sparta is shown by Thycydides to be singularly uninterested in the activities of the Athenians; it was the Corinthians who persisted in bringing the matter to their attention."

II. The Distribution of Power between Athens and Sparta

One may get a better understanding of the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War by approaching the problem from another angle. Thucydides points to structural causes of the war, such as the growth of the Athenian power. This insight is central to realist analysis of international politics. Platias and Taxiarchi discuss in some detail the factors that, according to Thucydides, prompted the shift in the power distribution in favour of Athens. Both approvingly cite Thucydides' analysis, according to which Athenian commercial and naval activities and the strategic environment emerging after the Persian Wars were responsible for the emergence and growth of the power of Athens.

Donald Kagan, in his *The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War*, challenges Thucydides' views by arguing that Athenian power did not increase between the end of the so-called First Pelloponnesian war and the beginning of the Second.[10] Platias in this volume offers a response to Kagan's position, on the one hand, to the assymetry between the economic power of Athens and Sparta, and, on the other, to the importance of economic power, the

enabling force behind military power. As a result, he restores Thucydides' claim that Athenian power was rising, thus posing a threat to Sparta and its allies.

Boucoyiannis disagrees with this analysis. She points out that Thucydides shows Athens having suffered serious set-backs in recent expeditions, as in Egypt. Its capacity to project power had thus been undermined. Even if still overall superior in power this factor alone cannot explain the outbreak of war: structure *per se*, she argues, can yield no determinate predictions on outcomes.

III. The Polarity of the Greek City-State System

A related issue is the bipolarity of the Greek world. Thucydides claims that the Greek world was basically partitioned into two spheres of influence whose major opponents were the Athenian (what had started as the Delian League) and the Spartan alliance. Yet, this view is not fully shared by all modern scholars. Platias and Taxiarchi review the arguments in the literature, which suggest that the system was multipolar due to the existence of other powerful actors, such as Thebes, the Greek colonies of Southern Italy and Sicily, and Corcyra.[12] However, they both reject these arguments. Platias defends Thucydides' view, stating that "although these actors (Thebes, etc.) tried to exploit the conflict between Sparta and Athens to their own advantage, they ended up siding with the central protagonists of the conflict. Hence the distribution of power was essentially bipolar." Arnopoulos also seems to agree with the view that the system was as bipolar as that of the modern cold war era.

Taxiarchi, however, takes the middle ground between the two competing arguments. According to her, the system was "bi-multipolar" or "quasi-bipolar", with two relatively stronger powers, but with other influential actors as well.

Constantinides introduces a different point of view. He considers bipolarity as the trait of the system as long as we analyse it on the basis of the hellenic world. But as we consider the system with the presence of Persia, it presents a different configuration, that of multipolarity.

IV. The Nature of Political Realism

Thucydides' text has been characterised as the most important clasic treatise of international relations, not because of its description of the events of the Peloponnesian War, but due to the the-

oretical positions that can be extrapolated from it, *vis-à-vis* the approach of political realism in international relations. Robert Gilpin reflects the consensus in the field when he describes Thucydides as the first political scientist, the first realist who paid attention to the significance of the changes in the distribution of power.[13]

Although there is no disagreement about the role of Thucydides as a father of political realism, scholars tend to disagree on the limits of the theoretical propositions that can be extrapolated from the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. For some, this text is an ideal statement typical of power politics, equating "might" with "right" as the Sophists had done. It is in this context that Philippoussis in this volume focuses on the principles of *Machtpolitik*, in his analysis of Pericles' *funeral oration*. He examines the antithesis and the dynamics of these principles, present at the beginning of the War, between Pericles and the Sophists as well as the Spartans.

From another perspective, Arnopoulos contrasts the Realpolitik approach of Thucydides with the pacifist theory of Plato. Arnopoulos considers Thucydides as the consumate realist because he recognized the complexity of circumstances and accepted the limitation of human intelligence to understand, let alone control events. In this sense, classic realism is opposed to idealism which engages a single facet of reality: be it the Platonic principle of Justice on the one hand or the Thracymachian policy of power on the other, as the determinant factors of history.

Others, such as Platias tend to focus on structural imperatives and therefore analyze the causes of major wars, in the same vein as Gilpin[14] and Waltz,[15] namely in terms of shifts in the balance of power.

Boucoyiannis does seem to disagree in principle with this version of political realism. However, she disagrees with the application of this model to the Peloponnesian War itself.

Others, like Taxiarchi in this volume, present an image of Thucydides as a complex realist,[16] operating at three different levels of analysis: a) human nature; b) domestic structure of society and c) interstate system.

Constantinides focuses on the famous dialogue in Thucydides' *History* between Athenians and Milians and argues that this implacable realism is the trait of international relations of any period of human history. The evocation of the great ethical principles, international law, human rights, etc. doesn't change the nature of these relations: "...it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule

wherever one can. This is not a law we Athenians made ourselves, nor are we the first to act upon it since its establishment. We found already in existence, and we shall have it in existence forever among those who come after us... anybody else with the same power as that which is now ours would act in exactly the same way". (Thucydides V,105,2)

V. The Nature of the Strategy

Although Thucydides stands out prominently as the forefather of international relations, his contribution to the study of strategy has been comparatively neglected. Platias attempts to highlight this contribution by arguing that in Thucydides' text we find for the first time in history an outline of a complete theory of grand strategy. He analyzes the grand strategy that Athens, under Pericles' direction, employed during the first phase of the Peloponnesian War and claims that the Periclean grand strategy was an excellent strategic design, which ensured Athenian success in the struggle. This view was vindicated in the first ten years of the Peloponnesian war -the period known as the Archidamian War. Platias agrees with Thucydides' interpretation of the Athenian defeat, namely that Athens was defeated only when it abandoned the Periclean grand stategy.

Philippoussis argues that, although the Spartan strategy remained constant and consistent throughout the Peloponnesian War, the Athenian strategy changed dramatically after Pericles' death with the Sophistic shift of polity due to the ideological differences. The resulting political infighting divided the Athenians, brought social anarchy and consequently weakened their military position.

In a somewhat fragmented manner Constantinides refers to the Periclean strategy as one of equilibrium and he opposes it to that elaborated by Alcibiades as the strategy of ambition. He considers that the failure of Alcibiades' strategy was not only the result of an unmeasurable imperialism but also that of the internal political games which finally gave the leadership of the sicilian expedition to Nicias, a man opposed to Alcibiades' strategy. Constantinides considers also that the innovative strategy of Lysander hasn't been studied cautiously.

Boucoyiannis, in her own contribution, pays detailed attention to the diplomatic strategy and tactics that the Corinthians used in order to drag Sparta into war. She presents the Corinthian

techniques in public diplomacy, lobbying, manipulation of other small allies, and the combination of threats and promises. In the end, according to her, Corinthian threats proved effective: "Through least heard in debates, the threat of Corinthian defection may have been the only fear that could goad the Spartans into action."

VI. Nature of the Athenian Imperialism

Athenian Imperialism has been interpreted either in political or in economic terms. De Romilly for instance argues in favour of political interpretation. Constantinides agrees with this interpretation, but adds an economical dimension to that picture and emphasises the importance of the sea in the development of Athenian imperialism making the parallel with Venise or Great Britain. Finally Arnopoulos synthesizes both points of view by his realistic interpretation of Thucydides. He points out the classical imperialism of the Greeks which was limited to domination of one greek polis by another, but unlike Persian, Roman, or modern imperialism. never included foreign nations before Alexander the Great. Thus, it combined not only economical, political, but cultural and national considerations. In that sense, the Athenian Empire was a result of the failure to confederate Greece voluntarily. That is why it became necessary for the Athenian democracy to behave undemocraticaly abroad.

VII. Pathology of War

In his contribution to this volume, Hourdakis presents the pathology of war in Thucydides' *History*. In his interpretation of the historian's text, Hourdakis argues that the war seems to be an illness of human nature and tries to find its origin and symptoms. Thus, Thucydides' history constitutes a diachronic study of human psychology and a tool of education for the amelioration and the change of human mentality.

Arnopoulos summarizes Thucydides's diagnosis of the war pathology as a loss of control. War is a disease that makes societies loose control of events in general and themselves in particular. Thus the great historian did not mince words in denouncing the *pathos* of *polemos* in no uncertain terms.

This volume illustrates the complexity of Thucydides' thought and the necessity to continue to study and analyse what the historian himself considered a creation "to last forever".

NOTES

1. Thucydides, **History of the Peloponnesian War,** trasl. by Rex Warner, London Penguin, 1972, A 22.

2. Thucydides, **History**, A 22.

3. Louis J. Halle, **The Elements of International Strategy,** Lanham: University Press of America, 1984, p. 15.

4. See, among others, Bruce Russett, "A Post-Thucydides, Post-Cold-War World", **Occasional Research Papers**, Athens: Institute of International Relations, 1992.

5. See, among others, John Mueller, **Quiet Cataclysm: Reflections on the Recent Transformation of World Politics**, New York: Harper Collins, 1995.

6. Robert Gilpin, **War and Change in World Politics**, Cambridge: University Press, 1981, p.7.

7. Robert Jervis, "Realism, Game Theory, and Cooperation, **World Politics** 40, 3 (April 1988). See also Michael Doyle, **Ways of War and Peace**, New York: Norton, 1977, p. 45.

8. See, among others, Robert O. Keohane, "Realism, Neorealism, and the Study of World Politics", in Robert O. Keohane (ed.), **Neorealism and its Critics**, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 7; Joseph Nye, Jr., "Neorealism and Neoliberalism", **World Politics** 40, 2 (January 1988), p. 235.

9. Thucydides, **History**, A23.

10. Donald Kagan, **The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War,** Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969.

11. Anton Powell, **Athens and Sparta: Constructing Greek Political and Social History from 478 B.C.**, London: Routledge, 1988, pp. 59-135.

12. W.R. Connor, "Polarization in Thucydides", in Richard Ned Lebow and Barry Strauss (eds.), **Hegemonic Rivalry from Thucydides to the Nuclear Age**, Boulder: Westview, 199, pp. 54-57.

13. Gilpin, **War and Change in World Politics**, p.53.

14. *Ibid*.

15. Kenneth Waltz, **Theory of International Politics**, Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979.

16. See also Doyle, **Ways of War and Peace**, pp. 49-92.