

## RECENCIONS/ BOOK REVIEWS

**A. Platias & C. Koliopoulos**  
**Thucydides on Strategy**  
**Eurasia Publications, Athens, 2006**

Yet another book on Thucydides has just come out in Athens. One would think that after the countless studies on the Greek classics, there could not be anything new to say on them. But such thoughts would be wrong because this book at least looks at Athenian and Spartan grand strategies in the Peloponnesian War from the particular angle of their contemporary relevance. From that optic, the authors pour the old wine of ancient history in the new bottle of modern strategy.

This interesting study by two professors of Panteion University in Athens tries to show that in spite of the quantitative increase and qualitative advance in warfare, the logic of organized conflict has remained the same throughout the millennia. The basic thesis here is that Thucydides is the father of strategic theory and his history is the prototype-archetype case study of interstate war.

To prove its thesis the book is divided into five chapters and a citation annex, with the relevant map, chronology and bibliography. The first and foremost chapter builds the conceptual framework for strategic analysis. Defined as a state's security policy by coupling means and ends in the face of international competition, strategy comes in many levels, from grand to tactics; the most well-known being military strategy, whether offensive or defensive, compellent or deterrent.

Grand strategies studied in the book have one of two goals: annihilation or exhaustion of the enemy by political, economic or social means. It is how a state attains its policy objectives and allocates its resources that grand strategy is planned and whether a state's capabilities match its commitments that its strategy is evaluated.

On the basis of their general model, the authors proceed to demonstrate it with the particular case of the Peloponnesian War, as presented and analyzed by Thucydides.

The authors agree with the ancient sage that the fundamental cause of this war was the rise of Athenian power and the attempt of Sparta to stem and reverse it. This structural thesis of Thucydides marks a revolution in strategic

thought from the mythical thesis of Herodotus' Persian War, because it explains historical causality by socio-economic factors rather than psycho-theologic ones.

The authors interpret this basic premise of power transition from one state to another as having led to a hegemonic war where a *status quo* Athens was checked by a revisionist Sparta. By their focus on strategy, however, the authors reversed the broader politico-ideological tradition that regards Sparta as the conservative *status quo* power and Athens as the revolutionary revisionist one.

Be that as it may, the inherent antagonism between the two great powers in a bipolar interstate system and the expected utility of war are the necessary and sufficient conditions of impending hegemonic conflict, as it did happen then and throughout history. Since it takes at least two to make a war, the authors view war is a contest between opposing grand strategies. The opposition in this case was between the annihilation strategy of Sparta and exhaustion one of Athens.

The authors devote two chapters deal with each one in turn. It is evident that since Athens was in the ascendant and time was on its side, it could afford a defensive dissuasive deterrent to exhaust Sparta's offensive persuasive efforts to reestablish the *status quo ante*. Sparta, on the other hand, required the more difficult aim of dissolving the Athenian Empire completely by decisive but risky land battles.

When, as in this case, one side is a naval and the other a land power, the situation favors the defense, as it did when Pericles correctly chose to outwait Sparta and avoid battle in its terms. The fact that Athens ultimately lost the war was due to the reversal of this reactive Periclean strategy. After his untimely death, unwise politicians underestimated their enemies and overextended Athenian reach in peripheral expeditions of military conquest. These costly strategic blunders, along with the entry of Persia on the side of Sparta, eventually outweighed the resources of the Athenian Empire and spelled its downfall.

The final chapter looks at Thucydides and strategy in historical perspective and concludes with some future prospects. To do so, the authors tabulate an evaluation of Spartan and Athenian grand strategy and construct a matrix of its determinants, cross-cutting interstate threat levels with balance of power tendencies. These and other interesting tables throughout the book are welcome because they should clarify complex concepts. Yet they sometimes prove formidable to interpret by too much information or oversimplify

reality by their Procrustean encapsulation of messy historical events.

Moreover, the complexity and multidimensionality of the subject forces the authors into apparent contradictions, as when they persuasively argue that a rising power seeks to change the *status quo*, a strategy they previously assigned to Sparta as a falling power.

Such inconsistencies could have been avoided had they put greater weight to a broader perspective that framed strategy within its political, technological and ideological environment.\*

Perhaps such excessive concentration in one aspect cannot be avoided completely because what one can gain by breadth must be paid by loss of depth and vice versa. In any case, this and other limitations become more apparent in giving specific examples of general principles, especially those of different historical periods and geographical regions when and where *ceteris paribus* do not apply.

Nevertheless, general principles and their corollaries must be formulated as guides to action, even if they are based on past examples and cannot be applied literally in all present situations and future conditions. With this *caveat*, we may agree with the authors that any war between super-powers has now become obsolete because of its unprofitable cost-risk-benefit calculation. Our main remaining fear is the recurring theme of history in underestimating the enemy and overextending oneself, the twin bane of many lost wars. This *hubris* of power, personified in Alcibiades, is now mostly manifest by the USA, so all we can hope for is that with the panoply of contemporary constraints we shall not repeat the gravest mistakes of the past.

Whether one agrees with the authors that we do not know anything about strategy that Thucydides did not know, there is no question about the primogeniture of his theory as the first classic of grand strategy. To this fact alone, the authors should be thanked for their latest scholarly tribute.

\* A great help to this end is the reviewer's *Exopolitics: Polis-Ethnos-Cosmos; Classical Theories and Praxis of Foreign Affairs*. Nova Science Publishers, NY, 1999.

Or its Greek translation *Exopolitika*, published by Leader Books in Athens, 2001.

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