REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE *(DD-MM-YYYY)*	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED *(From - To)*
05/10/2019	Master's of Military Studies	SEP 2018 - APR 2019

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE
Thucydides on Great Power Competition

5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
N/A

5b. GRANT NUMBER
N/A

5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
N/A

6. AUTHOR(S)
Kronjaeger, Timothy, R, Major, USMC

5d. PROJECT NUMBER
N/A

5e. TASK NUMBER
N/A

5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
N/A

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)
USMC Command and Staff College
Marine Corps University
2076 South Street
Quantico, VA 22134-5068

8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
N/A

9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)

10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
Dr. Bradford Wineman

11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)
N/A

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release, distribution unlimited.

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT
The timeless nature of Thucydides's History of the Peloponnesian War provides insight on modern relations between the US and other great powers, with underlying notions that can inform grand strategies and illuminate how fear, honor, and interest drive great power competition.

15. SUBJECT TERMS
Thucydides, Peloponnesian War, Athens, Sparta, Great Power Competition, Great Power Politics, Russia, China, NATO

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			USMC Command and Staff College
Unclass	Unclass	Unclass	UU	30	19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER *(Include area code)* (703) 784-3330 (Admin Office)

United States Marine Corps
Command and Staff College
Marine Corps University
2076 South Street
Marine Corps Combat Development Command
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

Thucydides on Great Power Competition

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

Major Tim Kronjaeger, USMC

AY 2018-19

Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member: Dr. Bradford A. Wineman, Ph.D.
Approved: _____
Date: 10 May 2019

Oral Defense Committee Member: Dr. Jorge Benitez, Ph.D.
Approved: _____
Date: 9 May 15, 2019

Oral Defense Committee Member: Dr. Paul Gelpi, Ph.D.
Approved: _____
Date: 10 May 2019

Executive Summary

Title: Thucydides on Great Power Competition

Author: Major Tim Kronjaeger, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: The timeless nature of Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War* provides insight on modern relations between the US and other great powers, with underlying notions that can inform grand strategies and illuminate how fear, honor, and interest drive great power competition.

Discussion: In the 5th Century BC, Thucydides wrote his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, not simply to recount the events of a war, but with the intent of illuminating what he viewed as fundamental truths about the nature of man and war. The Peloponnesian War was fought from 431-404 BC between the city-states of Athens and Sparta, resulting in a Spartan victory which destroyed the Athenian Empire and the world's first democracy. Like many wars, its causes were murky and debatable, its proceedings were just as unpredictable as the men who waged it, and the impact on the states who waged it was profound. Throughout the *History*, Thucydides detailed his observations and opinions in an effort to educate his readers on lessons that could be learned which would far transcend the ancient war that was the subject of his scholarship. The *History* is remarkable for its depth and detail, equal treatment of both belligerents, and a complete refrain from using mythology and religion as an explanation for events. Political scientist Robert Gilpin wrote that the *History* "is as meaningful a guide to the behavior of states today as when it was written in the 5th century BC," and believed that Thucydides would have no trouble understanding great power politics as they exist today. Although the Peloponnesian War was fought primarily on the geography of only three modern countries, at the time it involved over 200 sovereign city-states and empires, thus offering a wealth of material for the study of great power politics and interstate warfare.

Conclusion: If fear, honor, and interest are in fact the three strongest motives, restraint is the counterweight that can slow the inexorable churn towards unnecessary wars. For the US to avoid a war with the world's great powers, the deciding factor will be national decision-making and strategy development that is dispassionate and places an ultimate value on restraint.

DISCLAIMER

THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

Table of Contents

Page

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Dr. Bradford Wineman for his historical expertise, guidance, and mentorship throughout my development of this project.

"The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content. In fine, I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time."[1]

In the 5th Century BC, Thucydides wrote his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, not simply to recount the events of a war, but with the intent of illuminating what he viewed as fundamental truths about the nature of man and war. The Peloponnesian War was fought from 431-404 BC between the city-states of Athens and Sparta, resulting in a Spartan victory which destroyed the Athenian Empire and the world's first democracy. Like many wars, its causes were murky and debatable, its proceedings were just as unpredictable as the men who waged it, and the impact on the states who waged it was profound. Throughout the *History*, Thucydides detailed his observations and opinions in an effort to educate his readers on lessons that could be learned which would far transcend the ancient war that was the subject of his scholarship. The *History* is remarkable for its depth and detail, equal treatment of both belligerents, and a complete refrain from using mythology and religion as an explanation for events. Political scientist Robert Gilpin wrote that the *History* "is as meaningful a guide to the behavior of states today as when it was written in the 5th century BC," and believed that Thucydides would have no trouble understanding great power politics as they exist today.[2] Although the Peloponnesian War was fought primarily on the geography of only three modern countries, at the time it involved over 200 sovereign city-states and empires, thus offering a wealth of material for the study of great power politics and interstate warfare.

The timeless nature of Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War* provides insight on modern relations between the US and other great powers, with underlying notions that can inform grand strategies and illuminate how fear, honor, and interest drive great power competition. The purpose of this thesis is not to portray the US or any specific nation as strictly analogous to Athens or Sparta, rather it is to draw those lessons from Thucydides which can guide aspects of modern US strategy.

BACKGROUND

From the earliest times, the quality of the soil in the Hellas (modern Greece) influenced the spread of civilization and the geopolitical arrangement of Greek city-states. The regions with the most arable land were the destination of migrants who would cultivate the land, and the subject of conquests which would drive out the inhabitants at the hands of more powerful clans. The lands of Attica were particularly poor for agriculture and thus the city of Athens became the home of peoples driven from other regions, causing the city's population to reach such a size that it was forced to send colonists out from the city. During the seven centuries following the Trojan War, continual turmoil and local conflicts occurred throughout the native city-states of the Hellas and the Peloponnesus, and colonies spread throughout all the coastlines and islands of the Aegean Sea, as well as Italy and Sicily.[3]

The Ionians and the Dorians were the two primary ethnic groups, of which the Athenians were the leader of the former and the Spartans were the leader of the latter. City-states were composed of single ethnic groups and held varying degrees of allegiances, but held a foundational allegiance to their ethnic group despite local quarrels. Athens had become a democracy, a center for art and culture, established itself as the preeminent naval power and relied on currency and a robust trade economy to sustain itself, due to its large population and

poor agriculture. By contrast, Sparta was an oligarchy, with a militaristic culture, a dominant and widely-feared land army, little to no commerce and relied upon its enslaved population of Helots for agricultural subsistence. Many of the Hellenic city-states had become subject to local tyrants, but Sparta had retained a stable government for the previous 400 years, and around 500 BC it became the leader of the Peloponnesian League after removing tyrannies in many Dorian city-states.

During the same period, the Persians under King Darius conquered all of Ionia (modern Turkey), and in 490 BC sought to subjugate all of Greece, until they were defeated by the Athenians at the Battle of Marathon. Ten years later, his son King Xerxes again attempted this conquest, spurring the Spartans to temporarily unite with the Athenians and famously mount a defense at the Battle of Thermopylae. The Persian army successfully drove the Athenian people from their city, but were repulsed by the combined naval and military forces of Athens and Sparta respectively, thus ending the Persian invasions in 479 BC, although the Persian War persisted until 449 BC.[4] The Athenians consolidated their new power by forming the Delian League, a large alliance of mostly Ionian city-states which paid tribute to Athens in the form of silver currency or ships. The Spartans chose not to remain allied with Athens, and so withdrew from the Delian League and asserted themselves by forming the Peloponnesian League. Rather than a unification of Greek city-states, the period of 479 to 431 was characterized by skirmishes between Athens and Sparta, and each with their own allies.

Thucydides attributes the cause of the Peloponnesian War in 431 to the basic premise that Athenian power had become so great that it created a fear within Sparta that Athens would inevitably become powerful enough to conquer Sparta if it so chose.[5] This fear alone did not cause Sparta to initiate the war, rather, it influenced their decision-making while resolving

several smaller crises, which culminated in an escalation to war. After 27 years of war, Sparta and the Peloponnesian League defeated Athens, tore down its walls, and ended the Athenian Empire by dissolving the Delian League, freeing all of its subject city-states. "Now supreme in Greece, Sparta thus reduced Athens to a state of isolation, weakness, and dependency."[6]

Today, great power politics in international relations bear enough resemblance to the Greek city-states of the 5th century BC that Thucydidean lessons provide insight. According to political scientist John Mearsheimer, to be considered a great power a state must possess the offensive military capability to wage a serious war against another hegemon. He describes great power politics in terms of offensive realism, wherein the principle determinate of great power behavior is survival, and that struggle for the power necessary to survive encourages states to behave aggressively.[7] Much like Athens and Sparta before the Peloponnesian War, the US has intertwined histories of cooperation and conflict with other great powers, primarily China and Russia, yet has never engaged in full interstate war with either. Both nations exist in a state of competition against the US, not with a stated desire to escalate to war, but not without the possibility of escalation.

Although many Americans and Chinese died at each other's hands during the Korean War, the US and China have never been at war with one another. Additionally, during the Vietnam War and the Taiwan Strait Crises, the US and China have alternately supported opposing sides of conflicts. Since President Nixon reopened diplomatic relations between the US and China, trade between the two countries has grown to such an extent that each nation is the other's largest trading partner in the world. A Sino-American war would be disastrous to the economies of each, a concept known as mutually assured economic destruction.[8] Nevertheless, the two nations are locked in a great power competition with the other that has no end in sight. In

1999, two Chinese military officers wrote a book called *Unrestricted Warfare*, which posited that future wars would not be confined to traditional military actions, but would expand to encompass any domain. One of the authors subsequently stated that "the first rule of unrestricted warfare is that there are no rules, with nothing forbidden."[9] Current rhetoric from both nations indicates a mutual preparation for the possibility, although not the inevitability, of war against the other.

Since 1803, diplomatic and trade relations with Russia have existed almost continuously, but never as close relationship or lasting alliance. Following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the US did not formally recognize Vladimir Lenin's Bolshevik government as it gathered numerous nations into the USSR. Not until 1933, nine years after Joseph Stalin rose to power and installed his communist regime, did the US recognize the sovereignty of the USSR and resume diplomatic relations. When Nazi Germany invaded the USSR, the US began actively supporting the USSR under the Lend-Lease Act, then the two nations became allies when the US officially entered the war. The cooperation between the USSR and the rest of the Allies in WWII is best described as a temporary alliance of convenience, with the aggression of a common foe again being the only impetus for the alliance.[10]

Similar to US relations with China and Russia, prior to the Persian Wars, Athens and Sparta coexisted with relatively little cooperation nor outright war with one another, until all the Hellas faced the common existential threat of the Persian invasion. Any differences were set aside while the Persians provided the external stimulus for alliance, then shortly after the war's conclusion, the Spartans and Athenians reignited old differences and continued skirmishes against each other's allies.[11] Thucydides describes this period in the *Pentecontaetia*, the portion of his *History* which covers the 49 years that elapsed between the Persian invasions and the

beginning of the Peloponnesian War. This "interwar period" still experienced significant fighting after Athens renounced the treaty that existed between it and Sparta. Throughout the Hellas, various rebellions, counter-actions, raiding, scheming and open battles which occurred between Delian and Peloponnesian League city-states maintained an atmosphere of conflict between the two alliances led by Athens and Sparta. This protracted power struggle between Athens and Sparta allowed for considerable violence to occur without crossing the threshold of actual war between the two hegemons. For the US to avoid crossing that threshold with China or Russia, it must continue to adapt its strategies for great power competition.

GRAND STRATEGY

Unlike what Machiavelli would do two centuries later, Thucydides does not articulate principles or prescribe actions to be followed by statesmen or strategists. Rather, to learn from the *History*, one must be willing to draw lessons from a greater understanding of the Peloponnesian War, the dynamics inherent in the conflict, and the nature of the political system and warfare at the time. According to historian Christian Wendt, Thucydides imparts his timeless observations through a description of a war in which states and their leaders destabilized a political order without realizing the long-term consequences of their decisions. Thus, the *History* imparts lessons in what not to do.[12]

Grand strategy typically applies to statecraft and the highest levels of decisions inherent in embarking upon and waging war. John Lewis Gaddis defines grand strategy as "the alignment of potentially unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities."[13] B.H. Liddell Hart went further by writing that "grand strategy looks beyond the war to the subsequent peace."[14] To correctly align aspirations and capabilities to resolve conflicts and achieve peace, strategists must understand the dynamics of the conflict and the character of states involved.

National character, according to author Robert Luginbill, "consists of that peculiar degree of willingness to act that a national group can characteristically be expected to exhibit."[15] As a measure of national character, the Spartans were highly risk-averse, which influenced every aspect of their decision-making. Strategically, they were cautious by nature, deferring to inaction more frequently than action. Anytime the Spartans' focus became expeditionary, they risked the ever-present possibility of a revolt at home by their enslaved Helots. During the years between the Persian War and the Peloponnesian War, they made little preparation or reaction to Athenian growth. "The Spartans, though fully aware of [Athenian advancement of power], opposed it only for a little while, but remained inactive during most of the period, being of old slow to go to war except under the pressure of necessity, and in the present instance being hampered by wars at home."[16] On the other hand, the Athenians were known for their strategic daring, frequently making bold and risky decisions, often with successful results.[17] Thucydides declared the Spartans to be "the most convenient people in the world for the Athenians to be at war with," because of "the slowness and want of energy of the Spartans, as contrasted with the dash and enterprise of their opponents."[18]

The Athenians practiced direct democracy, whereby any Athenian citizen could participate in their assembly, where all major decisions were put to a vote by the entire assembly. Anyone who wished to speak at the assembly could do so, therefore influential citizens could use their power of rhetoric to convince the masses to make a swift decision. For better and worse, this enabled quick decision-making and matched the Athenian proclivity for continual activity.[19] By comparison, the US Founding Fathers sought to avoid a type of governance that was able to pivot easily on the impulses of factions which were susceptible to the whims of men. In the course of contrasting a republic with a pure democracy in Federalist #10, James Madison wrote,

"Hence it is that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention …and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths."[20] Madison was likely familiar with the Athenian's Sicilian disaster and was loath to see an American assembly that could be manipulated in such a way as Athenian generals Alcibiades and Nicias had done to their assembly.

In addition to their internal focus of continually quelling a Helot rebellion, the Spartans were slow to action, as compared to the Athenians, because of their form of governance and strict adherence to their laws. The Spartan people had two hereditary kings who were subservient to five Ephors, who were elected yearly. Any military action the kings desired was required to be approved by the Ephors, who could hold a vote by citizens only if they chose.[21] While addressing the Spartans prior to the war, a Corinthian envoy highlighted the difference in Athenian and Spartan cultures: "The Athenians are addicted to innovation, and their designs are characterized by swiftness alike in conception and execution; you have a genius for keeping what you have got, accompanied by a total want of invention, and when forced to act you never go far enough."[22] Spartan grand strategy typically was one of indolence, resulting from their system of governance and legal framework, both of which inhibited reflexive action or vulnerability to the rhetoric of individuals.

In the national characters of the ancient Greek city-states and in modern great power politics, the type of government institutions and observation of the rule of law frame a state's political appetite for action. Even while aware of Athenian activity and concerned about external threats, the Spartans by nature and by obligation, were forced to focus domestically. This caused them to rely on adherence to their own laws to ensure that they did not become involved with what they saw as unnecessary wars. As the Corinthians told the Spartans, "you alone wait till the

power of an enemy is becoming twice its original size, instead of crushing it in its infancy."[23] The rule of law that it has chosen to adopt in its own best interest similarly constrains the US. While this obligation to follow the rule of law is not disputed here, a commitment to adhere to international laws and a desire to uphold the moral high ground does cede the initiative to those who do not maintain the same ideals.

In their book, *Thucydides on Strategy,* Athanasios Platias and Konstantinos Koliopoulos described the Hellenic application of the strategies of exhaustion versus annihilation and direct versus indirect approaches.[24] When the Peloponnesian War began, Athens and Sparta adopted dissimilar strategies which were suited to their own natural strengths, and not necessarily focused on what would defeat their enemy. The Athenians were a first-rate naval power, the Spartans a first-rate land power, and each prioritized the use of their respective strength through the first 10-year portion of the war, also known as the Archidamian War, named after the Spartan king. The Athenians, recognizing the inferiority of their hoplite army and relying on the impregnability of the walls fortifying their city and the Piraeus, retreated into Athens and primarily used their navy to raid the coast of the Peloponnesus and other Spartan allies. The Spartan strategy was to raid Attica and Athenian allies while seeking a decisive battle with the Athenians where the advantage of their superior hoplite strength could be brought to bear. Thus, the Spartans applied a direct strategy of annihilation against the Athenian indirect strategy of exhaustion.

While 21st century warfare is evolved far beyond hoplites and triremes, the theory of exhaustion versus annihilation is still applicable to a US-Russia conflict as well. Nuclear weapons create a dynamic of mutual vulnerability which reduces the likelihood a direct approach which would involve NATO nations fighting in Russia or vice versa.[25] Just as the Peloponnesian War shifted elsewhere because Athenian walls and Laconia itself were considered unassailable,

so too could a US-Russian war shift to somewhere outside the sovereign territory of Russia or a NATO country. In such a scenario, it is reasonable to believe that escalation, unintentional or otherwise, could occur while avoiding the use of nuclear weapons by either side. Thus, a strategy of annihilation at the national level would be avoided and both sides would use various indirect approaches, even while direct confrontation and fighting was occurring. As long as the US maintains conventional overmatch as the world's largest superpower, it is vulnerable to a Russian strategy of exhaustion through proxy nations as an indirect approach to weaken and oppose US interests.

Drivers of Great Power Competition

It is possible to imagine many plausible scenarios where a seemingly minor incident between the US and another great power escalates into a war that no one wants, and the Peloponnesian War offers a framework for examining these possibilities. In 432 BC, the year before the war started, members of the Peloponnesian League convinced Sparta to call an assembly to hear complaints of Athenian aggression and arguments for initiating a war against Athens. After hearing accusations of the Spartans' allies, the Athenian envoy declared that fear, honor, and interest were three of the strongest motives which determined state action. In defending the advance of the Athenian Empire, he said "…fear being our principle motive, though honor and interest afterwards came in… And no one can quarrel with a people for making, in matters of tremendous risk, the best provision that it can for its interest."[26] By categorizing motives into these three types, the Athenians provide a lens through which to examine the potential for modern interstate actions.

Fear

Fear is the most simplistic of the three and is the basis of any individual or collective response to a perceived threat which inspires a fight or flight reaction. This is the fundamental underpinning of self-defense, and considered by modern legal theory as an appropriate justification. Robert Luginbill provides an explanation of fear's effect on man: "An aggressive human nature is the historical constant for Thucydides, but the degree to which its instincts can produce action is determined in the *History* largely by the psychological state of the individual or group at the time, with hope rendering men more likely, and fear making them less inclined to undertake the risks the politico-military situation may stipulate."[27] This is a compelling argument for individuals weighing the pros and cons of a tactical or operational decision, but does not capture the essence of fear as the underlying motivation for developing a grand strategy, such as whether or not to prepare for or initiate a war.

In the pre-war debates described above, the Athenians attempted to justify their grand strategy of expanding their empire as a response to fear of Spartan military power. Likely, they recognized the legitimacy of an argument based on fear as a basis for defense and used this line of reasoning as an attempt to justify the growth of their power, even though the Spartans throughout their history had shown no indications of conquest against the Athenians. Thucydides, himself an Athenian, attributed the underlying cause of the war to Spartan fear of Athenian power, which was being used for conquest and tyranny. During the Sicilian Expedition, in the 17th year of the war, the Athenians again attempted to rationalize their conquest of Sicily under the guise of a response to fear; "Now, as we have said fear makes us hold our empire in Hellas, and fear makes us now come, with the help of our friends, to safely order matters in Sicily."[28]

Even in defending the Sicilian Expedition, a strategic blunder which largely contributed to Athens' eventual defeat, the influence of fear was being evoked as a justification for action. In the 8th year of the war, a Sicilian speaker addressed the influence of fear on the willingness to engage in war: "That war is an evil is a proposition so familiar to everyone that it would be tedious to develop it. No one is forced to engage in it by ignorance, or kept out of it by fear, if he fancies there is anything to be gained by it."[29] Poor tactical circumstances can cause a fear that creates caution and inhibits action, but threats to national security will cause the type of fear that is likely to stimulate a reaction.

Fear has historically been the basis of arms races and defensive escalations. When viewed from the perspective of nuclear-capable nations outside of NATO, many of their actions can be attributed to a reaction to fear for their own security. Since the beginning of the nuclear age, these nations have attempted to offset the superior strength of the US military and economy by developing and maintaining nuclear arms to deter an attack by other nuclear-capable nations. According to author Richard Lebow, "As realists have long recognized, concern for security can rapidly be made self-fulfilling through a reciprocal process of escalation. Precautions are interpreted as indicative of intentions, which provoke further defensive measures, intensify conflict, and can lead to war through preemption, loss of control, or a decision to support a threatened third party."[30] Just as the Spartans viewed the initiation of the war as a power-balancing act against Athens, non-NATO nations will likely see nuclear capability as a bargaining chip to balance against NATO military strength.

In this light, Russian attempts to strengthen its position in relation to the US are a logical outgrowth of the fear caused by American nuclear weapons and conventional overmatch. According to strategist Colin Gray, "Even if a Thucydidean fear does not grip the United States,

it has to be judged likely that such a dangerous condition of anxiety may well grip Beijing or Moscow, of course, with potentially dangerous consequences for us."[31] Whether the US is a real or only perceived threat to its security, as long as Russian leaders view the US in this manner, fear will be a driver of its actions. This echoes John Mearsheimer, who maintains that the fear of an opposing power's offensive military capability is what determines the probability of fighting a war.[32] After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has maintained a steady effort to solidify its zone of security by increasing its influence and control over the buffer states between it and NATO countries. When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, the addition of a warm water port in Sevastopol allowed Russia to guarantee increased maritime influence in the Black Sea, in direct opposition to neighboring NATO countries.[33] Prior to 2014, Ukrainian leaders had asserted ambitions of joining NATO, an action that Vladimir Putin deemed an unacceptable expansion of NATO towards Russia.[34] As long as Russian military action continues to destabilize Ukraine and prevent a turn towards NATO, this conflict will be a success on Russia's terms. With the US and NATO projecting naval power in the adjacent Black Sea and potentially in the Sea of Azov, there is clear potential for an unintended escalation to take place.

Just as the Peloponnesian League felt justified to react to growing Athenian power with its own consolidation of power, other nations are likely to justify actions taken to address their geographical vulnerabilities and offset their military disadvantage as a response to US hegemony. This is known as the security dilemma, which is "a structural notion in which the self-help attempts of states to look after their security needs tend, regardless of intention, to lead to rising insecurity for others as each interprets its own measures as defensive and measures of others as potentially threatening."[35] Graham Allison has written at length about China's status as a rising power and the considerable similarity to Athens before 431 BC. He refers to the

dynamic as "The Thucydides Trap," wherein a rising power confronts the hegemony of a ruling power, resulting in war.[36] Just as the Spartans eventually realized the need to check the power of Athens before it was too late, the US will potentially face the fact that China's economic and military power is set to surpass its own. With this dynamic in mind, the US is well-served to ensure that defensive posturing in key regions around the world is not overly provocative in a manner which only inspires further strategic insecurity which results in efforts to counter US influence.

Honor

The concept of honor as a motive for action could take several forms. First, honor could mean the credibility formed by demonstrating the resolve to uphold treaty obligations.[37] To maintain credibility with the rest of its allies around the world, the US must display that it is willing to intervene on behalf of nations with which it has chosen to form alliances. Thucydides attributes the cause of the war to Spartan fear of Athenian growth and while this is true at a fundamental level, specifically, Sparta initiated a war it did not want because of three separate escalatory issues involving its allies within the Peloponnesian League. Two of these issues were distant from Sparta itself and hardly related to Sparta's core interests.

First, the mixed-ethnicity citizens of Epidamnus who were experiencing civil difficulties appealed to both Corcyra (member of neither the Delian nor Peloponnesian League, but inhabiting a strategic island and possessing a naval strength second only to Athens) and Corinth (a Spartan ally). This led to an indecisive war between the two, but resulted ultimately in Corcyra allying with Athens and Athens engaging in a naval battle with Corinth, an event which Corinth claimed violated an existing peace treaty between the two leagues. Second, in retaliation, Athens besieged Potidaea (a Corinthian colony, but Athenian tributary), resulting in further Athenian-

Corinthian battles. Third, and most significantly, the Athenians refused to rescind the Megarian Decree, which had forbidden the Spartan ally of Megara from conducting trade in Athens' port. The cumulative effect of these three issues provided the catalyst for Sparta to go to war, at the behest of her allies, against Athens.[38]

The possibilities abound for how the US might be forced into a war against Russia as a result of actions against allied nations. At root, the US does not gain benefits from many of its allies, the Baltic States for example, other than preventing aggression by revisionist nations and preserving the world order as it exists now. Yet, an uncontrollable event such as protests and revolt among ethnic Russians in Latvia or Lithuania that resulted in civil instability and the influence of Russian gray-zone activities could lead NATO into an intervention. Likewise, a similar issue in the Caucasus could potentially result in a conflict in Turkey with "non-attributable" Russian forces, causing Turkey to invoke Article V and elicit a response by the US and NATO forces which are obligated to respond.

The second manner in which Thucydides's concept of honor could become a major influence is in the traditional realm of a nation maintaining its reputation or retaliating against real or perceived grievances. This is the realm of unintended escalations that occur when diplomacy and cooler heads do not prevail or when Clausewitzian passion usurps rational decision-making at the national level. Democracies and authoritarian governments such as Putin's are equally susceptible.

During the pre-war debates of 432 BC, the Spartan king Archidamus offered a level-headed and characteristically non-aggressive argument against the war, adding that "complaints, whether of communities or individuals, it is possible to adjust; but war undertaken by a coalition for sectional interests, whose progress there is no means of foreseeing, may not be easily or

credibly concluded,"[39] and "if we undertake the war without preparation, we should by hastening its commencement only delay its conclusion."[40] Nonetheless, his desire for restraint was overruled when the ephor Sthenelaidas conjured a feeling of indignation among the Spartan assembly, telling them "let us not be told that it is fitting for us to deliberate under injustice; long deliberation is rather fitting for those who have injustice in contemplation."[41] With this, convinced of the need to avenge Athenian actions and their own potential loss of reputation, the Spartan assembly voted in favor of war.

In 2019, the American public and its Executive Branch are easy to enflame and this carries the strong potential for a lack of restraint. Attributable to the pervasive usage of social media, a shift in traditional media focus, a President who flaunts the capability of his military and is willing to engage continually with the public, and other factors, the US appears highly susceptible to emotional decision-making. Clausewitz describes this temperament of "men whose passions are easily inflamed, in whom excitement flares up suddenly but soon burns out," and goes on to state "inflammable emotions, feelings that are easily roused, are in general of little value in practical life, and therefore of little value in war."[42]

Particularly if it involved the death of US servicemen, an act of violence, whether accidental or not, carries a risk of retaliation to preserve the honor of US prestige. An unsafe aerial or naval interaction with Russian or Chinese military forces that resulted in US deaths could potentially garner patriotic, but emotional, bipartisan and public support for taking military action in response. A sense of honor and the desire to defend national reputation by any nation involved in this type of scenario has the possibility to overwhelm the restraint that is required to yield rather than to escalate. The restraint demonstrated by world leaders in the past has avoided disaster and is the attribute that civilian and military leadership require to mitigate future crises.

Interest

Interest, Thucydides's final category of national motivation, can be viewed as the political goals that a state wishes to pursue. Interest is potentially the broadest of the three drivers of great power competition, as it can encompass anything that an individual leader or a state desires to accomplish to achieve some gain for itself. The Spartans' singular interest was their own security; maintaining their homeland, way of life, and their own existence as a culture was the overriding factor in nearly every decision they made. This was borne out by preventing a Helot revolt and supporting its allies only insomuch as that contributed to the preservation of their own security. By contrast and as already described, the Athenians were an ambitious and continually active people, who "were born into the world to take no rest themselves and to give none to others."[43]

Thucydides repeatedly described an Athenian mindset which embodied the cliché that "might makes right," and believed that any action taken on behalf of self-interest was above reproach. While addressing the Spartans during the 432 BC pre-war debates, the Athenians stated that "it was not we who set the example, for it has always been the law that the weaker should be subject to the stronger," and that "when calculations of interest have made you take up the cry of justice – a consideration which no one ever yet brought forward to hinder his ambition when he had a chance of gaining anything by might."[44] The most notable employment of this mindset occurred during the Melian Dialogue in the 16th year of the war. A Spartan colony on an island in the Aegean Sea, Melos had remained neutral thus far during the war when an Athenian expedition arrived and demanded their submission. During the dialogue which followed, the Athenians famously declared that "right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."[45] Ultimately, the

Melians refused to submit and the Athenians subsequently slaughtered all the Melian men, sold the women and children into slavery, and colonized their island. Few today would characterize the Athenian's ruthless actions at Melos as anything other than an ancient war crime, but modern great powers still impose their will on weaker nations while acting on behalf of their own interest.

After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the US quickly responded by going to war against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan to remove their ability to operate from safe havens within the region. Although supported by NATO when it invoked Article V, the US war on terror has gradually morphed for 18 years into an open-ended conflict in numerous countries against virtually any organization that is willing to take up arms against the US. While these terror groups are non-state actors and US actions are hardly comparable to the Athenians' at Melos, the US clearly wields its power to employ violence in the interest of preventing future attacks against it.

In the last 15 years particularly, Russia has demonstrated its willingness to take increasingly aggressive actions on behalf of its national interest. These actions bear even more resemblance to Athenian ideas of power. The Russo-Georgian War in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and current power projection in the Black Sea and Syria are the most notable examples. The most important characteristic of these Russian actions has been the ability to conduct their operations without provoking any significant international response. By a large measure, Russia does not have the military strength to directly combat that of the US or NATO and has effectively developed strategies to tailor its wars of interest in such a way as to avoid direct confrontation with other great powers.[46]

After re-emerging as a great power in recent years, China has skillfully displayed the ability to advance its national interests through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)[47] while

avoiding the need to do so through armed conflict. Superficially, China's BRI projects are foreign investments into infrastructure development, but fundamentally apply predatory lending practices, coercion, and entrapment as means to secure influence in the affairs of other states.[48] As a rising power and as an actor in a great power competition with the US, China is following its theory of unrestricted warfare and establishing international conditions to its advantage. When viewed as an outgrowth of political and economic warfare, the BRI is a method "to subdue the enemy without fighting,"[49] under the guise of financial development. Today, Russia and China engage in competition with the US by enacting their national strategies which seek to avoid war with the US, and both nations share a common disadvantage by lacking a network of strong allies.

In the spirit of cooperation and security, states with mutual interests have always stood to benefit by forming alliances. The plethora of city-states and alliance interactions in the *History* provide ample material for analysis and comparison to modern great power politics. At the end of the Persian invasions, the Spartans characteristically withdrew to the seclusion of their homeland, leaving the Athenians with the veneration of the many smaller and less powerful city-states of the Aegean. The continuing conflicts of the Persian Wars necessitated a common defense and the Athenians were a natural fit for leadership of the Delian League, which came to comprise over 200 city-states. Members were required to pay annual tribute to Athens, most in the form of currency and some in the form of ships or timber. This financial tribute and Athens' corresponding political and administrative organization enabled the Athenians to develop the largest and most powerful navy. All members of the Delian League had equal say in decisions, but over time, the Athenians acquired such influence that no dissenting voices had the power to overrule Athenian wishes. The Athenians also exported democracy throughout their allies by

coming to the aid of democratic governments and helping overthrow oligarchic factions within the league.[50] In ironic contradiction of their democratic values, domination over the Delian League resulted in the Athenians becoming a tyranny themselves before the Peloponnesian War began. This was recognized by the Athenian general and statesman Pericles, who was conflicted over this fact but acknowledged that to give up the tyranny would be more dangerous than to maintain it.[51]

In contrast to the Delian League's requirement of submission to Athens, the Peloponnesian League was strictly a military alliance and although it was the undisputed leader of the league, Sparta required little from its allies. Membership in the Peloponnesian League involved no financial obligations, only the requirement for member city-states to swear to maintain the same allies and enemies, and follow the leadership of Sparta in its endeavors. This was possible since Spartan hoplite warfare was not nearly as expensive as naval warfare. As a prerequisite for allied action though, Sparta required itself to hold an assembly of its allies and convince a simple majority to approve a course of action. Only the Spartans were able to call an assembly, which prevented them from being obligated to conflicts in which they did not want to participate. The Spartans rigidly adhered to these laws of their own making, and when combined with their natural predisposition to avoid all unnecessary external action, contributed to the lethargic and reactive temperament of the Peloponnesian League.[52]

Thucydides's commentary provides examples of the benefits and the risks of forming, relying upon, and going to war with alliances. Very few bilateral alliances between Athens or Sparta and other city-states were ironclad, rather there existed a continual reassessment by the lesser city-states regarding whether membership in the Peloponnesian or Delian League was beneficial to its own security or economic wellbeing. Thus, the self-interest of each sovereign

entity was the overriding consideration and was always open for renegotiation. This was demonstrated notably by Argos, a powerful democracy with a fertile and strategic territory between Attica and Arcadia, which reached the expiration of a 30-year peace treaty with Sparta in the 10th year of the war. Over the course of four years, Argos shifted its allegiances several times, as a result of various attacks, revolts and political intrigues that sought to manipulate its leaders into shifting their considerable strength towards one of the leagues or other sub-alliances. Throughout that period, the Argives repeatedly based their decisions on what would most benefit their city-state, rather than a loyalty towards a higher ideal, ethnicity, or political organization.[53]

The actions of the Argives illustrate some dynamics of great power politics in action. Political scientist John Mearsheimer explains the strategies of balancing and buck-passing as methods of preventing a great power from altering the status quo. Both the Delian and Peloponnesian Leagues are examples of balancing, as each side worked to consolidate power to offset the strength of the other. Buck-passing is a term to describe when a lesser power attempts to convince another state to counter the aggressor while remaining on the sideline and avoiding direct conflict itself.[54] By exploiting the opposition of the two hegemons, the Argives continued to shift allegiances between the leagues to avoid fighting with either while perpetuating the conflict between Athens and Sparta. Similar actions occur in modern great power politics, as various states engage in buck-passing responsibility to the United States to take the lead on conflicts, crises, or disagreements.

For Athens and Sparta, the anchors of the two opposed alliances, the decision to accept or compel the allegiance of various city-states also was based purely on their interests rather than a reflection of morality or ethnic loyalty. Athens relied on the raw resources (timber, silver, and agriculture) of city-states of the north Aegean Sea and the Black Sea, the naval power (ships and

sailors) of all the Aegean city-states, and the financial contributions of all its allies. Sparta relied on other hoplite armies to augment its own powerful but small army and allied navies such as Corinth, due to its own non-existent navy. In the 20th year of the war, Sparta entered into agreements with the Persians, who provided the financial means for Sparta to build a navy that could compete with the Athenians. This tepid alliance with their historical enemy became the key component of Spartan strategy which enabled their eventual total victory over Athens. After 27 years of fighting which ravaged all the Hellas before the Peloponnesian War concluded, both the Athenians and the Spartans had lost sight of why they were originally fighting, bent only on the destruction of the other.

Conclusion

While the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs from 1989 to 1993, Colin Powell displayed a framed Thucydides quote in his Pentagon office: "Of all manifestations of power, restraint impresses men the most."[55] In reality, Thucydides never wrote this, although he surely would have agreed. The Athenians were unapologetic realists who believed that just because they could, they should. In the end, this ambition and perennial optimism cost them the war and their empire. Prior to the war, and on two notable occasions thereafter, the Spartans appealed for peace which the Athenians denied. If fear, honor, and interest are in fact the three strongest motives, restraint is the counterweight that can slow the inexorable churn towards unnecessary wars. For the US to avoid a war with the world's great powers, the deciding factor will be national decision-making and strategy development that is dispassionate and places an ultimate value on restraint.

[1] Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 1.22.4. All Thucydides citations in this thesis are from this translation of Thucydides, edited by Robert Strassler.
[2] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 7 and 211.
[3] Thucydides, 1.2.1-6.
[4] Tom Holland, *Persian Fire: The First World Empire and the Battle for the West*. (New York: First Anchor Books, 2007).
[5] Thucydides, 1.23.5.
[6] The Landmark Thucydides, Epilogue, 549.
[7] John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001), 4-54.
[8] Joseph Harriss, "Cool War with China?" *The American Spectator*, Sep 2013, 34-36. https://search-proquest-com.lomc.idm.oclc.org/docview/1438895587?accountid=14746.
[9] David Barno and Nora Bensahel, "A New Generation of Unrestricted Warfare," *War on the Rocks*, Apr 19, 2016. https://warontherocks.com/2016/04/a-new-generation-of-unrestricted-warfare/
[10] US Department of State, "United States Relations with Russia: Establishment of Relations to World War Two," Office of the Historian. https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/pubs/fs/85739.htm
[11] Thucydides, 1.18.3.
[12] Christian Wendt, "Thucydides as a "Statesman's Manual"?" in *Thucydides and Political Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
[13] John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 21.
[14] B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Meridian, 1967).
[15] Robert D. Luginbill, *Thucydides on War and National Character* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 16.
[16] Thucydides, 1.118.2.
[17] Thucydides, 1.70.2-7.
[18] Thucydides, 8.96.5.
[19] Athanasios G Platias and Konstantinos Koliopoulos, *Thucydides on Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 25-26.
[20] James Madison, "Federalist No. 10 The Same Subject Continued" in *The Federalist Papers* (New York: Penguin, 1961), 76-77.
[21] Paul Cartledge, "Appendix C: Spartan Institutions in Thucydides" in *The Landmark Thucydides.*
[22] Thucydides, 1.70.2.
[23] Thucydides, 1.69.4.
[24] Platias and Koliopoulos, *Thucydides on Strategy*.
[25] Elbridge Colby, *The Role of Nuclear Weapons in the US-Russian Relationship,* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Feb 2016. https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/02/26/role-of-nuclear-weapons-in-u.s.-russian-relationship-pub-62901
[26] Thucydides, 1.75-76.
[27] Luginbill, *Thucydides on War and National Character*, 66.
[28] Thucydides, 6.83.4.
[29] Thucydides, 4.59.2.
[30] Richard Ned Lebow, "Thucydides and Deterrence," *Security Studies 16* no. 2: (2007), 172.
[31] Colin Gray, "Thucydides Was Right: Defining the Future Threat" *Strategic Studies Institute*, (US Army War College, 2015), 41.
[32] Mearsheimer, 42-46.
[33] Andrew Monaghan, "The Ukraine Crisis and NATO-Russia Relations," *NATO Review Magazine*, 2015. https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2014/Russia-ukraine-nato-crisis/Ukraine-crisis-NATO-russia-relations/EN/index.htm
[34] Paul Belkin, "NATO: Response to the Crisis in Ukraine and Security Concerns in Central and Eastern Europe" *Congressional Research Service* (July 2014), 17. https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R43478.pdf
[35] John Herz, "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma", *World Politics* vol. 2, no. 2 (1950), 157.

[36] Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).
[37] Rebecca Friedman Lissner, "Preventing a Credibility Crisis in America's Most Important Alliance," *War on the Rocks*, Mar 10, 2017. https://warontherocks.com/2017/03/preventing-a-credibility-crisis-in-americas-most-important-alliance/
[38] Thucydides, 1.24-146.
[39] Thucydides, 1.82.6.
[40] Thucydides, 1.84.1.
[41] Thucydides, 1.86.4.
[42] Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 106.
[43] Thucydides, 1.70.9.
[44] Thucydides, 1.76.2.
[45] Thucydides, 5.89.
[46] Michael Kofman, "Raiding and International Brigandry: Russia's Strategy for Great Power Competition" *War on the Rocks*, Jun 14, 2018. https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/raiding-and-international-brigandry-russias-strategy-for-great-power-competition/
[47] Ministry of Commerce of the PRC. *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road.* (Beijing, China: Ministry of Defense, 2015) http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html
[48] Simeon Djankov and Sean Miner. China's Belt and Road Initiative; Motives, Scope, and Challenges. *Peterson Institute for International Economics.* https://search-proquest.com.
[49] Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 78.
[50]Alan Boegehold, "Appendix B: The Athenian Empire in Thucydides" in *The Landmark Thucydides.*
[51] Thucydides, 2.63.2.
[52] Paul Cartledge, "Appendix D: The Peloponnesian League in Thucydides" in *The Landmark Thucydides.*
[53] Thucydides, 5.27-83.
[54]Mearsheimer, 138-167.
[55] Simon Hornblower and Charles Stewart. 2005. "No History without Culture." *Anthropological Quarterly* 78 (1) (Winter): 269-277. https://search-proquest-com.lomc.idm.oclc.org/docview/216478494?accountid=14746.

Bibliography

Allison, Graham. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

Cartledge, Paul. *Spartan Reflections*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

Cartledge, Paul. *The Spartans : The World of the Warrior-Heroes of Ancient Greece, from Utopia to Crisis and Collapse*. 1st ed. Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 2003.

Gaddis, John Lewis. *On Grand Strategy,* New York: Penguin Press, 2018.

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

Hanson, Victor Davis. *The Father of Us All : War and History, Ancient and Modern*. 1st U.S. ed. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010.

Hanson, Victor Davis, and John Keegan. *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009.

Harriss, Joseph. "Cool War with China?" *The American Spectator*, Sep 2013. https://search-proquest-com.

Hart, B.H. Liddell. *Strategy.* New York: Meridian, 1967.

Holland, Tom. *Persian Fire: The First World Empire and the Battle for the West*. First Anchor Books ed. New York, New York: Anchor Books, 2007.

Hornblower, Simon and Charles Stewart. 2005. "No History without Culture." *Anthropological Quarterly* 78 (1) (Winter): 269-277. https://search-proquest-com.

Kagan, Donald. *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy*. New York: Free Press, 1991.

Kagan, Donald. *The Peloponnesian War*. New York: Penguin Books, 2004.

Madison, James. “Federalist No. 10; The Same Subject Continued” in *The Federalist Papers*. New York: Penguin, 1961.

McGregor, Malcolm Francis. *The Athenians and Their Empire*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987.

Mearsheimer, John. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics.* New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001.

Platias, Athanasios G. and Konstantinos Koliopoulos. *Thucydides on Strategy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Roebuck, Carl, and Russell Meiggs. "The Athenian Empire." *The American Journal of Philology* 96, no. 2 (1975).

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963.

Thucydides. *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

Wendt, Christian. “Thucydides as a Statesman’s Manual?” in *Thucydides and Political Order.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Xenophon, and Rex Warner. *History of My Times (Hellenica)*. The Penguin Classics, L175. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1966.