Thucydides' Legacy in Grand Strategy

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In the mid-1970s, students arriving at the US Naval War College were sometimes disconcerted to discover that their first seminar in the new curriculum developed by Admiral Stansfield Turner would focus on the ancient Greek author Thucydides, 'an unknown book about an apparently irrelevant war by an author with an unpronounceable name' (Gaddis 2018, 60-1; cf. Stradis 2015). Such a response is much less likely today; Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War are now familiar names in the field of politics and military strategy, cited as authoritative by generals, international relations theorists, politicians and journalists. Quotations from his work – above all the doctrine of 'might makes right' from the so-called Melian Dialogue, and the summary of the 'truest cause' of the war popularised recently as the 'Thucydides Trap' – are regularly deployed to explain the dynamics of contemporary geopolitics (e.g. Welch 2003; Allison 2017). Recent studies of grand strategy likewise present him as a brilliant and pioneering analyst of the subject (e.g. Murray 2011, 6; Martel 2015, 24) or take for granted principles derived from his work such as the primacy of the motives of 'fear, honour and interest' (e.g. Gray 1999, 196, 348; Baylis, Wirtz & Gray 2016, 7).

However, the place of Thucydides in Grand Strategy is paradoxical, or at least confused, in three respects, which echo his reception within International Relations theory (cf. Lebow 2012; Keene 2015). Firstly, Thucydides is presented as both ancient and modern; like Sun Tzu, he is invoked to establish the antiquity of the discipline and the timelessness of certain key principles of statecraft, as a figure who transcended the limited perspective of his time to understand events in an essentially modern manner, but at the same time he is offered as evidence for the limited development of strategic thought before the second half of the twentieth century, not least because of the undeveloped condition of his society (e.g. Martel 2015, 24-5; Gaddis 2018, 33-6). Secondly, he is praised as a pioneering theorist of strategy and inter-state relations, but discussions of his work then focus not on any exposition of theory but on the historical events that he described – that is, drawing on the alternative tradition of interpreting Thucydides since the Renaissance, as a 'scientific' and uniquely reliable historian and source of information about the past, and taking his account at face value (e.g. Tsakiris 2006; Platias & Koliopoulos 2010). Thirdly, while Thucydides is mentioned as an important figure by most (though not all) writers on grand strategy, he is rarely discussed in any detail; the majority of references are rhetorical rather than substantive, establishing him as a mythical founding figure of the discipline and drawing on his accumulated cultural authority (cf. Ruback 2015 on the comparable practice in IR) while side-stepping awkward questions about the actual nature and content of his work and how this might affect its relevance to modern strategic analysis.

The majority of references to Thucydides in grand strategy literature, therefore, are either superficial or problematic. However, this does not make him irrelevant. The argument of this chapter is that Thucydides' exploration of the events of a specific period of distant history offers an important complement to more explicit theoretical approaches to the subject. While he does not offer anything resembling a theory or precepts of grand strategy, despite the claims of a few of his admirers, we can read his work as a kind of case study, a thought-provoking source of

analogies and examples that is 'good to think with', and even as a metacommentary on the possibilities and problems of grand strategy in the contemporary world.

1. The Nature of Thucydides' Project

Theorists of grand strategy are certainly not alone in assimilating Thucydides' text to the norms and assumptions of their own modern discipline, at the expense of ignoring or obscuring its more awkward and anachronistic aspects; what is striking in this case is the attempt at combining, or at least juxtaposing, the two divergent traditions of modern reception. Since his work was rediscovered, translated and disseminated in western Europe in the fourteenth century, having been known for the previous millennium or so only through passing remarks of authors like Cicero, Thucydides has been taken as an intellectual model and inspiration (Harloe & Morley 2012; Lee & Morley 2015). Most such readings have involved a combination of familiarization and defamiliarization: Thucydides is presented as an example or template for imitation, because of the perfection of his work and/or its innovative qualities, but generally within the present conception of a given genre or discipline – but with no agreement as to which discipline has the strongest claim to his legacy. In concrete terms, historians have tended to see him as a model historian, and political theorists as a kind of political theorist (cf. Ober 2001; Lebow 2012).

The historical claim is, on the face of it, the more obvious and convincing, given that the bulk of Thucydides' text is an apparently straightforward narrative of what we know as the Peloponnesian War, the thirty-year war between the Lacedaimonians (Spartans) and the Athenians in the second half of the fifth century BCE. Not only was his subject matter historical; so too, it is frequently argued, was his methodology. The widespread conviction that Thucydides was an especially reliable, objective and trustworthy reporter of information about the past is based partly on considering his text in the context of his biography: although he identified himself as an Athenian, he did not spare his fellow citizens from criticism (and was criticised for a lack of patriotism by at least one ancient commentator); conversely – with the possible exception of his depiction of one or two Athenian politicians – he does not appear vindictive either, despite being exiled by Athens for his own failure as a general (Morley 2015, 71-96). Still more important are his stated methodological precepts at the beginning of his first book, which underpinned the case that his work anticipated modern critical historiography: his rationalising interpretations of mythical traditions and events like plagues and eclipses, his insistence on the need to enquire carefully into the past and emphasis on the difficulty of doing so, and his contempt for those who accept the first story they hear and those who write history for entertainment rather than truth (Greenwood 2006; Forsdyke 2017).

> It is difficult to be sure of every detail in the evidence since people accept quite uncritically any reports of the past they get from others, even those relating to their own country. (1.20.1)
>
> I investigated ever detail with the utmost concern for accuracy. This was a laborious process of research, because eyewitnesses at the various events reported the same things differently, depending on which side they favoured and on their power of memory. (1.22.2-3)

This version of Thucydides exemplifies the historian's duty to the truth of the past as an end in itself, and the critical methods required to achieve this, and his work is then taken as a wholly reliable source of historical information – including about the strategic thinking of his protagonists. However, there are multiple grounds on which this image might be questioned. For most of the events described we have no contemporary sources other than Thucydides' account, and he rarely discusses or describes his evidence; we are required to take a great deal of his narrative on trust. Even more problematic are the speeches that he put into the mouths of important individuals, while admitting the impossibility of recording them verbatim and instead offering a formulation that has troubled historians ever since: 'What I have set down is how I think each of them would have expressed what was most appropriate in the particular circumstances, while staying as close as possible to the overall intention of what was actually said' (1.22.1). This blurs the distinction, which historians are keen to maintain, between Thucydides' supposedly critical and objective account and other, more literary and rhetorical – and hence less reliable and scientific – forms of historiography, associated with pre-modern approaches.

However, Thucydides' own description of the purpose of his work casts doubt on the idea that he aimed to chronicle events as an end in itself:

> [My work] will have served its purpose well enough if it is judged useful by those who want to have a clear idea of what happened in the past and what – the human condition being what it is – can be expected to happen again some time in the future in similar or much the same ways. It is composed to be a possession for all time, and not just a performance-piece for the moment. (1.22.4)

Historians have been happy to accept this as a boilerplate statement about the value of knowing about the past. Since the nineteenth century, however, and especially in political theory and international relations since World War II, the passage has been understood in a much stronger sense, as the foundational statement of a normative social science. If there are constants in human affairs – the phrase "the human condition being what it is" is often translated as "according to human nature" – then Thucydides appears to be asserting the possibility of identifying consistent laws or principles, that will continue to hold true in future, on the basis of his study of past data.

The most familiar example of such an interpretation is the Realist school of international relations theory, which gives Thucydides credit for identifying some basic principles of inter-state relations: for example, the primacy of rational motives of fear, interest and honour, the irrelevance of issues of justice and ethics in conflicts between states, and the ability of the stronger power to dictate terms while weaker powers are forced to comply (e.g. Gilpin 1984; Gustafson 2000). The actual course of the war in Thucydides' account, especially its outbreak, is understood as exemplary, blurring the distinction between events and their interpretation and providing a template for understanding future occurrences:

> In summary, according to Thucydides, a great or hegemonic war, like a disease, follows a discernible and recurrent course. The initial phase is a relatively stable international system characterized by a hierarchical ordering of states with a dominant or hegemonic power. Over time, the power of one subordinate state begins to grow disproportionately; as this development occurs, it comes into conflict with the hegemonic state. The struggle between these contenders for pre-eminence and their accumulating alliances leads to a

> bipolarization of the system. In the parlance of game theory, the system becomes a zero-sum situation in which one side's gain is by necessity the other side's loss. As this bipolarization occurs the system becomes increasingly unstable, and a small event can trigger a crisis and precipitate a major conflict; the resolution of that conflict will determine the new hegemon and the hierarchy of power in the system. (Gilpin 1988, 596-7)

The confident assertions of these scholars about Thucydides' supposed thesis are rendered somewhat questionable by the absence from the work of any such statements of transhistorical principles or general laws in the historian's own voice, let alone detailed elaboration or analysis of them. As Thomas Hobbes, one of the first and most perceptive of Thucydides' English translators, noted, 'Digressions for instruction's cause, and other such open conveyances of precepts (which is the philosopher's part), he never useth' (1629, xxii).

Instead, it is necessary to extract statements of general principle from the words that Thucydides puts into the mouths of characters in his account: for example, the Athenian representatives, in a debate at Sparta, who claim to have been motived by fear, honour, and interest like any other state (1.75), or the Athenians at Melos who refused to consider anything other than pragmatic arguments from the Melians, on the grounds that issues of justice were relevant only between those of equal power (5.89). The problem, as critics of Realism have long observed, is that this rests on a series of problematic assumptions: that Thucydides intends us to read these claims as transhistorical principles rather than as contingent, historically specific arguments, that they are supposed to be axiomatically true, and that we should identify them without question as Thucydides' own views (e.g. Johnson 1993 and 2015; Ahrensdorf 1997; Welch 2003). These statements are more plausibly understood as Thucydides' characterisation of the thinking and assumptions of the speakers – the different attitudes that led to the outbreak of war; the arrogance of the Athenians at Melos, just before they launched their disastrous expedition to Sicily – and indeed offering them for analysis and criticism, especially as they most often appear in dialogue or debate with opposing arguments.

It is not simply that Thucydides was not, in any doctrinaire sense, a Realist, although he was undoubtedly interested in similar issues about state motivation and decision-making and the relationship between power and justice (cf. Morley 2018). He was not in fact concerned to advance any specific theory about human behaviour, even if we can identify recurring concerns in his work with the problems of rhetoric, emotion and democratic deliberation or with the role of chance in events and the limits of human foresight (Hawthorn 2014). But it is equally obvious that he did not intend simply to impart information about past events as an end in itself. Rather, as Hobbes observed, Thucydides deployed various literary techniques to present events in a manner which immersed his readers in the action as spectators or even – hearing speeches in major debates and having to weigh the opposing arguments – as vicarious participants. Readers primed by his introduction to identify possible analogies and lessons, and to recognise their own times in the events he described, would thus come to reflect on wider questions about the course of the war, the causes of events, the role of chance and contingency, the influence of individual leaders versus the force of larger developments and structures, the nature of political deliberation, and much else. The best explanation of the long tradition of contradictory interpretations of what Thucydides *really* meant is that he was entirely successful in creating something which anyone could find useful in trying to understand their world; it is always

possible to identify some analogies with later events, and to hear echoes of present concerns, while passing over the many sections which fail to speak to *this* present.

The implications of this for the study of grand strategy are obvious. We should not expect to find Thucydides advancing any explicit theory of strategy, and should not assume that the strategic precepts and arguments expounded by characters in his account can be straightforwardly ascribed to him (*pace* Platias & Koliopoulos 2010). Further, we should be cautious about taking his description of Athenian and Spartan strategy at face value; certainly he intended to offer a true account, but his version of events is an interpretation, not a simple chronicle (cf. Kagan 2010). We are engaged with 'Thucydides' Peloponnesian War', a complex artefact intended above all to open up questions and provoke further thought.

2. Grand Strategy in the Peloponnesian War

Thucydides did not talk in terms of 'strategy', let alone 'grand strategy'; *stratēgia* for him refers simply to the holding of the position of *stratēgos*, one of the Athenians' ten annually-elected generals, including his own unsuccessful term of office in 422 (e.g. 1.95.6, 5.26.5; Martel 2015, 61-2). This neglect is a general feature of classical antiquity, rather than a personal blind spot; there is no discussion anywhere in classical literature of the idea that the relationship between generalship and other forms of the exercise of power should be considered explicitly, and even the concepts of 'policy' or 'planning' are alien to the classical world-view, despite the fact that some translations make it appear that ancient leaders pursued such things (on ancient strategy, cf. Wheeler & Strauss 2007, 186-7, 213-23). It is nevertheless entirely reasonable to say that Thucydides did study these themes, regardless of whether he had a name for them or treated them as a unity.

This is true not just in the trivial sense that Thucydides described not only battles and military manoeuvres but the whole course of the war, including the political debates and decisions that shaped military activity (Freedman 2013, 29-30). In terms of William Martel's definition of grand strategy, Thucydides' subject matter is long-term (the war lasted for three decades, on and off), concerned with the highest ends of the state, and employing all means – primarily military, but also diplomacy and elements of 'soft power' (compare for example the arguments, in the Mytilenean Debate and Melian Dialogue, about how the actions of Athens will affect its reputation and hence influence the future behaviour of other states; 3.39.7, 3.45-47, 5.95-99). More importantly, he clearly aspired to an understanding of the war as a complete phenomenon, offering a perspective that goes well beyond that of any of the participants in both chronological scope and analytical depth. His account of 'why the Peloponnesians and Athenians fought with one another' begins not with an account of escalating tensions between the two sides over previous years or decades, but with a schematic overview of early Greek history that establishes the dynamic relationship between resources and conflict, framed by doubts about human capacity to evaluate strengths and advantages, offering a broader sociological context for the war (1.1-20; Foster 2010).

The multi-layered nature of his interpretation is seen most clearly in his account of the actual outbreak of the war. On the one hand, he concludes his introductory remarks with the claim (recently popularised as 'The Thucydides Trap' and applied to current US-China relations: Allison 2015) that 'the truest cause but the one least discussed' was the rise of Athens and the fear this provoked in Sparta, so that the latter were compelled to war; this remark, complex and

ambiguous in the original Greek, emphasises the underlying structural factors compelling actors without their knowledge, a precursor of the 'sleepwalkers' interpretation of the origins of World War I (Jaffe 2017). However, Thucydides' narrative immediately moves on to the specific events that led to Sparta's declaration of war, highlighting the different motives of multiple actors, not only the two protagonists, and the many ways in which the debates about war on each side could have turned out differently (even if only to delay the inevitable). He is concerned with the ability of decision-makers and deliberative bodies to evaluate situations successfully, and their susceptibility to having their judgement swayed by wishful thinking or other emotions; with the conditions under which strategic decisions are made, and the capacity of different political organisations – the difference between Athenian and Spartan politics is an important theme – to develop and maintain a grand strategy.

The bulk of Thucydides' narrative of the war can be divided between two categories of action: deliberations and decision-making, and manoeuvres, sieges and battles. He shifts backwards and forwards between the development of strategy, however inchoate, and its attempted implementation. None of this is shown to be straightforward; people and deliberative bodies make decisions, but as readers with the benefit of hindsight and a broader perspective we are conscious of the weaknesses in their reasoning – and these decisions can rarely if ever be put fully into practice with the intended consequences. One example of Thucydides' technique is the speech of the Corinthian representatives at a meeting of the Peloponnesian allies, denouncing the Spartans for their failure to act against Athens (cf. Badian 1993):

> Spartans, your faith in your own constitution and society makes you mistrustful of outsiders like ourselves when we have something to tell you. This does give you your quality of self-discipline, but it also leaves you in greater ignorance when it comes to dealing with anything outside Sparta. Many are the times, for example, that we warned you of the threat the Athenians posed to us, but you refused to learn the lessons we were giving you and preferred instead to suspect the speakers of being motivated by our domestic feuds with Athens. (1.68.1-2)
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> We ought not to be still considering whether we have been wronged but how we should be responding in our defence. Men of action make their plans and then strike decisively and at once against those who dither… Of all the Greeks you Spartans are the only ones to be so passive: you defend ourselves against attack not by the use of power but by being *about* to use it; and you alone put an end to an enemy's expansion not in its early stages but when they are twice their original size.(1.69.2-4)

This speech serves multiple purposes. It presents to the reader reasons why war could have been seen as desirable, necessary, or unavoidable from the Peloponnesian side (without implying that these claims were necessarily true); it implies possible interpretations of events (Spartan failure to act in a timely fashion – 'You are the ones to blame for all this' (1.69.1) – versus Corinthian aggression in forcing the issue because of their own long-standing enmity towards Athens); and above all it offers a characterisation of the Spartans and their approach to strategic thinking (cf. Gaddis 2018, 36, on the link made between culture/character and strategy). It is made clear that the Spartans do indeed lack overall strategy, beyond a wish to be left alone if possible, which has led them to delay taking any action, and now prompts a precipitate reaction. Following this debate, one of the Spartan kings, Archidamus, argued for a policy of building up resources and

preparing for war, not being afraid of their reputation for slowness – 'On no account must we let ourselves be carried away by the hope that the war can be brought to a speedy end if we devastate their land' (1.81.6) – but the people had now been roused to anger and were easily manipulated by another prominent Spartan into voting for immediate war, although 'it was still impossible for them to give effect to it immediately given their state of unreadiness' (1.125.2).

Thucydides' characterisation of the absence of Spartan grand strategy, ventriloquised through the Corinthians, is borne out by subsequent events. With the partial exception of explicitly un-Spartan individuals like the energetic general Brasidas, their approach to fighting Athens is thoroughly traditional, based on the invasion of Athenian territory in the hope of bringing them to battle, largely reactive, and regularly ineffective, as on multiple occasions – even after the Sicilian disaster – they fail to take advantage of opportunities or Athenian errors (Hunt 2006). This account is historically plausible, as the fundamental imperative of Spartan policy was to avoid any risk of their subject population of helots revolting and hence to avoid committing too many of their own forces to any action (Kelly 1982). However, Thucydides clearly presents their caution as both culturally embedded and problematic; the Spartans lack any wider vision or imagination, and hence are incapable of pursuing victory effectively against a more imaginative and/or less predictable enemy.

For much of the war, this absence of strategic thinking was equally true of the Athenians; as presented by the Corinthians in the same speech, they appear as a force of relentless but poorly directed energy, constantly trying something new and daring. They themselves, perhaps disingenuously, echoed the claim that their power had been allowed to develop through Spartan inaction, and that their empire was acquired almost by accident:

> It was only when you were unwilling to stay on to deal with what was left of the barbarian forces that the allies approached us and of their own accord asked us to assume the leadership. These were the circumstances that first forced us to develop the empire to its present point. Fear was the strongest motive, followed later by honour and then by self-interest as well. (1.75.1-3)

The idea of Athens lacking any longer-term strategy is echoed on several subsequent occasions, when Athenian leaders chide their citizens for their unwillingness to do what is necessary to maintain an empire – which 'is like a tyranny, which it seems wrong to take but perilous to let go' (2.63.2). This emphasises the crucial point that, while Spartan strategy was driven by caution and conservatism rather than any coherent plan, Athenian strategy was volatile and short-term, shaped by the emotional reactions of the *demos* to immediate events and the ways in which these could be manipulated or channelled by competing speakers in the assembly (Wohl 2017).

This theme is highlighted – as is Thucydides' concern with the subject – by the sole exception to the absence of conscious and coherent grand strategy in the Peloponnesian War: the policy of Pericles, Athens' leader at the outbreak of the war (Foster 2010; Taylor 2010; Azoulay 2010). Pericles' strategy was simple: to refuse to engage with the militarily superior Spartan soldiers when they invaded Athenian territory, but instead to withdraw within the city's walls, using Athenian naval dominance to maintain food supplies and attack Spartan interests elsewhere. What is important is that this approach is clearly presented by Thucydides, through a series of speeches he puts in the mouth of Pericles, as an explicit and coherent strategy, grounded in understanding and foresight (Kagan 2010; Platias and Koliopoulos 2010, 35-60). Pericles reassures the Athenians that his plan is based not only on evaluating both sides'

resources but on analysing these in relation to wider principles – 'Capital is what sustains a war rather than forced contributions' (1.141.2-4) – and anticipating likely developments. He insists on the need for long-term consistency rather than short-term reaction, even in the face of difficulty and uncertainty: 'I know that the mood in which people in general are persuaded to go to war does not remain the same when they actually undertake it, but that they change their minds with their circumstances. So I see that I must now give you very much the same advice as before…' (1.140.1). Further, the famous and much-quoted Funeral Oration offers a coherent statement of the state's highest political ends to be pursued globally over the long term (to echo Martel 2015, 31), with Pericles emphasising Athenian exceptionalism in democracy, freedom and openness as the foundation of the approach and, as he claims, the source of their destined victory. As with any other speech in Thucydides, none of this is to be taken at face value – in a number of ways, Pericles' exposition of Athenian values is idiosyncratic and manipulative (cf. Roberts 2012) – but it reinforces the sense that he possessed a clear vision of grand strategy and sought to implement it – and often, though never consistently, to articulate it to his fellow citizens (as Walling 2013 notes, he just as frequently sought simply to reassure them that he had such a plan).

Whether Pericles' strategy, deeply unpopular with many Athenians, would have prevailed in time is unknown, due to his death in the plague that struck Athens in the second year of the war; this is one of the most important counter-factual possibilities in the whole work. Thucydides praises Pericles' foresight in avoiding direct engagement or other risks, and suggests that the wisdom of this was confirmed by subsequent events (2.65.5-11) – but the nicely ambiguous language could mean that his successors took risks and so brought disaster, without necessarily implying that Pericles' avoidance of risk would certainly have brought success. Certainly Thucydides emphasises the dependence of this strategy on the personality of Pericles, able to overrule the short-term thinking and emotions of the people through personal authority; 'what was nominally a democracy was really the rule of the first man' (2.65.9), implying that Athens was capable of pursuing a grand strategy only if it became less democratic and less Athenian. The nature of political leadership is shown to be central to the successful development of any sort of strategy (contra Platias and Koliopoulos 2010, 4).

The Mytilene Debate (3.36-49), in which the Athenians first voted to massacre the entire population of a revolted ally and then changed their minds next day, offers one case study of their lack of consistent strategy and susceptibility to manipulation (Macleod 1978). An even more crucial example is the Sicilian Debate, in which Thucydides depicted the defeat of a cautious, quasi-Periclean strategy of the avoidance of ambitious overseas adventures, albeit badly articulated, by a combination of ignorance of the enemy and the situation, over-confidence in the predictability of events, arrogant belief in Athenian power and the lack of any long-term perspective (6.1-26; Kallet 2001). And in the aftermath of the subsequent disaster, Thucydides caustically remarked, the Athenians denounced the orators who had proposed the expedition, as if they themselves had not voted for it (8.1.2).

3. Principles and Problems of Ancient Grand Strategy

Thucydides' account is always overtly focused on the specifics of historical events: he shows how the combination of Pericles' coherent strategy and the Spartan lack of strategy led to the outbreak of war at that time and in that manner, while the death of Pericles and the lack of grand strategy on either side thereafter was one of the crucial factors determining how events

subsequently played out and prolonging the war (Platias 2002; Tsakiris 2006). But it is easy to see how one might draw wider conclusions from this account, potentially relevant to the present. In his depiction of Pericles, Thucydides showed that grand strategy in the full meaning of the term was possible in classical Greece, albeit rare, dependent on specific conditions and individuals, and fragile. There is no guarantee of the success of such an approach – if the planner's grasp of conditions or available resources is faulty, or their anticipation of developments is overly optimistic or pessimistic, as Thucydides arguably implied of Pericles (Foster 2010) let alone the impact of chance events – but the lack of such a grand strategy clearly leaves a state more vulnerable, or at any rate more subject to the vagaries of events or the changeable emotions of people. Pericles' early death invites counterfactual reflection: would his strategy have succeeded, if he had lived, and if not why not? Could Athens ever have prevailed without such a plan, unless by sheer chance? Did the Spartans win simply because Athens made too many serious errors, given their own lack of grand strategy?

This offers a basis for considering other episodes in the narrative. The Melian Dialogue, for example, can be read in multiple ways. The Athenian expedition can be evaluated against the original Periclean strategy of avoiding overseas conquests, and against Thucydides' claims about the strategies of Pericles' successors. Further, and perhaps more illuminating, we can explore the claims made by the Athenians in the Dialogue about the dominance of power and self-interest and the superiority of being feared to being liked in dealings with other states, and the responses offered by the Melians – not in search of timeless principles that can be elevated into a theory of grand strategy, but rather as deliberately contentious claims and would-be principles that need to be interrogated. Thucydides staged a debate between competing conceptions of the world and how to engage with it, raising questions about the relationship between means and ends and the extent to which any strategy depends on assumptions about the predictability of events (cf. Ober and Perry 2014). As readers, we are not supposed to adopt the Athenians' strategy or the assumptions that underpinned it; they are presented in this unusual dramatic form to compel us to question them, so as both to understand the ways that other states and powerful groups may think and to reflect on our own assumptions.

For an equally illuminating and less familiar example, we can consider the speech made by the representatives of Corcyra before the war, seeking to persuade the Athenians to enter into alliance with them against Corinth (1.32-6). A crucial element in Thucydides' presentation is that the Corcyreans put forward their arguments as answers to the questions the Athenians ought, they claim, to be considering, in terms of their own behaviour – 'What we used to think of as prudent behaviour on our part – avoiding any external alliance that could expose us to sharing the risks in a neighbour's policy – is now revealed as a misjudgement and a source of weakness' (1.32.4) – and in relation to long-term strategy, motives, and the anticipation of future developments.

> If you accept into an alliance people whose most vital interests are at stake, you can expect to see abiding proofs of their gratitude; and furthermore, we have built up a navy which is greater than any but yours. Just think – what could be a greater stroke of luck for you, or more irksome to your enemies, if an additional force you would have paid so much to have and would have been so grateful for comes to you of its own accord, unsolicited, and offers itself up at no risk or expense on your part, bringing you honour

> in the world at large, the gratitude of those you are directly helping, and more power to your own cause? (1.33.1-2)

Thucydides then prompts his readers to question every statement and assumption by offering counter-arguments. The Corinthians seek to dissuade Athens from the proposed alliance largely by raising issues of justice, duty and past behaviour, rather than advantage or expediency – which becomes part of the explanation for Athens eventually deciding to ignore them – but they include a broader statement of principle about choosing strategy: 'One's advantage is in fact best served by making the fewest mistakes; and the future prospect of war, with which the Corcyreans are trying to scare you and lead you astray, remains an uncertain possibility' (1.42.2). And of course the untrustworthiness of this claim – or at least the impossibility of being certain how to decide on the relative likelihood of different events occurring – is emphasised by the fact that the Athenians, having ignored Corinthian advice, later offer some very similar advice to the Spartans in *their* deliberations about war:

> Think in advance about how unpredictable war can be before you find yourself involved in one. The longer a war lasts the more likely it is to turn on matters of chance, which we are all equally unable to control and whose outcome is a matter of risk and uncertainty. Men go to war and launch into action as their first rather than what should be their last resort, and only when they come to grief do they turn to discussion. (1.78.1-2)

This is, we may surmise, less about establishing a useful principle for the development of strategy – it is clearly already a truism in fifth-century BCE Greece – than about identifying difficulties with the enterprise. Successful development and implementation of strategy and grand strategy depend on being able to anticipate events, or having a plan that is invulnerable to chance; but Thucydides' narrative offers a series of examples which highlight the inability of human beings to predict or anticipate successfully, and which emphasise instead their tendency towards excesses of optimism or pessimism, confirmation biases, and groupthink – the Sicilian Debate being simply the most prominent example (Turner 2018).

4. Conclusion

In important respects, Thucydides' account echoes Martel's view (2015, 24) on the absence of grand strategy in the pre-modern era. Even in the case of Pericles – whose example serves above all to prove the general rule – it is too dependent on individual inspiration, rather than being sustained by any form of institution, and too vulnerable to the vagaries of politics, whether the whims of the *demos* or the in-fighting of oligarchs or the suspicions of a monarch. The pressure to respond to immediate events, in the absence of a strong commitment to consistency, is usually overwhelming. It is typical of Thucydides' provocative approach that the most eloquent denunciation of the tendency of democratic systems to be swayed easily by emotions and manipulative rhetoric is put into the mouth of the arch demagogue Cleon, a figure we are primed to mistrust:

> The most dire prospect of all is if none of our decisions remain firm and if we fail to recognise the following facts: that a city is in a stronger position if it has bad laws which are always enforced than it if has good laws which lack authority; that a lack of learning combined with a sense of responsibility is of more general benefit than undisciplined

> smartness; and that unsophisticated people are for the most part better at managing cities than their intellectual superiors. The latter always want to appear wiser than the laws and to outdo any proposals made in the public interest. (3.37.3-4)

The question is whether these are problems solely with grand strategy in the pre-modern era, lacking the full recognition of its power and necessity which the moderns have now developed, and without the institutional framework to ensure its adoption and consistent implementation. From this perspective, the utility of Thucydides' work is that it demonstrates the adverse consequences of an absence of grand strategy for the successful defence of a state's interests.

But that is to ignore the issues which Thucydides' account raises for any attempt at developing and implementing grand strategy. If future events are not predictable, especially given humans' tendency to exhibit a range of cognitive biases in trying to predict them, what kind of grand strategy can actually be effective? Is an effective grand strategy possible only if it is insulated from democratic control, over-riding short-term popular sentiments and concerns? And – given that the Athenian attack on Syracuse was wholly consonant with Athens' self-image, and certainly justified on the basis of claims about Athenian values and character – is the common insistence on a link between the highest values of the state and its grand strategy more problematic, more open to mythical thinking and manipulation, than is entirely reassuring?

Of course, we do not need Thucydides in order to raise such questions. However, he offers a powerful means for exploring them. The original idea of introducing Thucydides into the curriculum of the Naval War College was not as a source of maxims and principles or as an insight into the supposed timeless and universal laws of international relations, but as a complex, ambiguous and unfamiliar text, describing complex and unfamiliar situations, which could be considered from multiple perspectives. His work prompts consideration of comparisons and analogies, while remaining in its essence an account of a safely distant past; it offered military officers in the 1970s a means of discussing Vietnam without mentioning Vietnam, just as for later generations it could offer a means of discussing Iraq or Afghanistan without becoming bogged down in contemporary political debates about those wars. Thucydides' name is no longer unfamiliar, but the most important and thought-provoking parts of his work for grand strategy remain under-explored.

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