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***Thucydides on Strategy Athenian and Spartan Grand Strategies in the Peloponnesian War and Their Relevance Today***

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It is a common vice of some IR pundits to willingly imprison themselves in a safe so-called 'conceptual framework', thinking that they can then express what they want relevantly. Thus they go in for model-building, picking and choosing among the historical literature to prove their hypotheses, unlike the historian, who does not have to prove his relevance, given that all centuries are, in the words of Ranke, 'equal in the eyes of God.' Just as some PR pundits, in their quest for academic respectability, claim that the Bible, particularly the story of Peter and Paul, is an example of early PR, so some IR people latch onto, and re-interpret, Machiavelli, Hobbes and Thucydides to promote their theories of power politics, which more often than not involves promoting unilateral war, on the primitive 'might is right principle'. This book does this with a vengeance, claiming (p.xi) that Thucydides' text on the Peloponnesian War is a masterpiece of strategic analysis, 'vying with Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and Clausewitz's *On War*'. Strangely, the authors forget to mention Machiavelli's *The Art of War*. Perhaps the renowned Florentine diplomat's comment in his preface that the military had become completely corrupt and far removed from the ancient ways would not have fitted well into the thrust of Platias' and Koliopoulos' book, since it would have highlighted Eisenhower's nightmare of the military-industrial complex. At any rate, the authors transmogrify Thucydides into an IR theorist on strategy, as if the world were unaware that he was himself a general who took part in the war. This approach of course detracts from the fact that Thucydides was primarily an expert chronicler of a dreadful and pointless war, and that he hardly ever ventures to give his own judgments. If he does, and it is a big if, it only comes out by default, through his record of what other people have said.

The book itself is divided into five chapters, the first being 'Grand Strategy: a Framework for Analysis', which includes five simplistic tables and figures, and tries to tell the reader the difference between 'strategy' and 'grand strategy', saying (p.5) that 'the highest level of strategy is grand strategy', and that it 'refers to the use of all available means (military, economic, diplomatic, etc.) at a state's disposal, in order to achieve the objectives set by policy in the face of actual or potential conflict'. In other words, when a state goes to war, it adopts a strategy; whether one calls it 'grand' or not is hardly a crucial matter. Trying to differentiate between different levels of strategy arbitrarily is perforce a risky matter, and can confuse people in its very simplisticness, usually with the aid of simple diagrams, which take the reader away from the oft-ignored human factor. The second chapter, by extrapolating from Thucydides, gives a potted version of 'Athens and Sparta: Power Structures, Early Conflict and the Causes of the War', as do the third and fourth ones, 'Periclean Grand Strategy', and 'Spartan Grand Strategy'. What the precise difference between 'grand strategy' and 'strategy' is, is anyone's guess, since military chaps normally consider sub-strategies as 'tactics'. And do not high level politicians also mix strategies and tactics, just as they often confuse the ugly terms 'geopolitics' and 'geostrategy'? The final chapter, more interesting, sets out to look at 'Thucydides and Strategy in Perspective' (without, however, saying what the perspective is), bringing in, *inter alia*, NATO expansion, the Cold War, the Battle of Waterloo, Spanish hegemony, and the Great War, and saying in its conclusions (p.117) that 'the vice of underestimating an enemy will not be eradicated in the future', and that 'it might even be argued that each side will tend to view itself as



the more determined or the one with the higher morale.' These are hardly earth-shattering revelations.

The justification for attempting to portray Thucydides as a writer on strategy, rather than - in Thucydides' own words - as someone setting out to help 'those who want to understand clearly the events that happened in the past', is provided in a fifteen-page appendix of quotes, under various modern IR headings such as 'appeasement', 'balance of power', 'co-ercive diplomacy', 'horizontal escalation' (oh dear!), 'loss-of-strength gradient', 'preventive war', 'security dilemma', and the like. Thankfully, they do not mention 'collateral damage'. Equally thankfully, they admit that Thucydides did not use contemporary strategic jargon. The problem here is that it is highly debatable whether Thucydides was trying to teach strategy at all, unless the authors believe that by recording what other people said, he was trying to do so subliminally. But if this is the case, then it is equally arguable that much of Thucydides' history is an argument against war and power-politics, especially given some of the argumentation by the protagonists in the 'Melian Dialogue'. You can't have it both ways. More worryingly, out of 154 cherry-picked quotes in the appendix, only 62 are not from speeches by various Athenians, Spartans, Corfiots, Corinthians and Syracusans. Even many of these 62 are indirectly reported, and do not therefore represent analysis on Thucydides' part. Under the rubric 'Fear and National Security Policy', we have the Corfiots saying: 'Sparta is frightened of you and wants war', while under the heading 'numerical superiority', we have King Archidamus saying: 'Perhaps there is ground for confidence in the superiority which we have in heavy infantry and in actual numbers.' These 'discoveries' are not exactly mind-bogglingly original. This cherry-picking by the authors comes across as somewhat otiose, ingenuous and naïve. Curiously, there are no headings and quotes for 'strategy' and 'grand strategy'.

Perhaps anticipating the above criticism, it must in fairness be said that the authors write in a footnote (p.137): 'Hence, we feel that we are not too wrong to talk about "Thucydides' analysis", even when dealing with events actually mentioned by somebody else.' They justify this coy statement about 'not being *too* wrong', by claiming that no other ancient historian approaches Thucydides' analytical depth, and that the overwhelming majority of the material in their book comes from Thucydides. This is simplistic casuistry, and not convincing. What is convincing is the authors' contention that the issues tackled by Thucydides have recurred through the centuries and remain relevant today. But even then, Thucydides himself wrote that the events which had happened in the past will be repeated in the future.

For those interested in criticising theoretical IR interpretations as against historical ones, this book might be of some interest, but only if they read the whole of Thucydides' 'History of the Peloponnesian Wars' first.

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