

DIAS–Analysis

No. 34 • November 2008

Stefan Haid

Why President Obama Should Read Thucydides

Ancient Lessons for the 21st Century

www.dias-online.org

Duesseldorf Institute for Foreign and Security Policy
c/o Juristische Fakultät der Heinrich-Heine-Universität
Universitätsstr. 1, 40225 Duesseldorf, Germany

Stefan Haid

studied business/economics and political science at the universities of Passau, Mannheim, and ESSEC Graduate School of Management in Paris as well as international relations at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of Johns Hopkins University in Washington. Parallely to his PhD thesis at the German University of Administrative Sciences Speyer he has been working as a strategy consultant for governments and international corporations, focusing on country competitiveness und e-government. The author is member of DIAS, IISS, Tönissteiner Kreis and the Young Foreign Policy Experts of the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation.

Stephan Haid can be reached at stefan_haid[at]web.de.

Stefan Haid
Why President Obama Should Read Thucydides, DIAS-Analysis No. 34, November 2008
Duesseldorf, November 2008

Editor
Duesseldorf Institute for Foreign and Security Policy
c/o Juristische Fakultät der Heinrich-Heine-Universität
Universitätsstraße 1 40225 Duesseldorf, Germany

www.dias-online.org

© 2008, Duesseldorf Institute for Foreign and Security Policy (DIAS)

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Comparative Analysis	1
2.1 Power Balance	2
2.1.1 Hegemon.....	2
2.1.2 Allies	3
2.1.3 Neutrals	4
2.1.4 Adversaries	4
2.2 Distant Expedition.....	5
2.2.1 Reasons and Objectives	6
2.2.2 Military and Financial Resources	7
2.2.3 Difficulties.....	7
2.3 Consequences	9
2.3.1 Internal.....	9
2.3.2 External	9
3. Conclusion.....	10

Why President Obama Should Read Thucydides

Ancient lessons for the 21st century

“I doubt seriously whether a man can think with full wisdom and with deep convictions regarding certain of the basic international issues of today who has not at least reviewed in his mind the period of the Peloponnesian War and the fall of Athens”. George Marshall¹

1. Introduction

After the end of the Cold War, international relations seem to have reached an even higher degree of complexity than George Marshall was thinking of while uttering these words. The study of Thucydides’ “History of the Peloponnesian War” might indeed be one of the few remedies to fully comprehend the current state of global affairs. Assuming that the similarities between the Hellenic world and the present state of global affairs constitute a sufficient analogy despite all obvious comparative flaws and Thucydides’ deficiencies, this paper aims to compare the Sicilian expedition of the Athenians with the Middle East Policy of the outgoing US administration under George W. Bush and draw lessons from it for the future. Being intended for readers with a strategic mindset, this paper leaves morality aside and relies on the national interest as the prime driver of state actions so that moral judgements are entirely left to the reader’s discretion.

Concurring with Robert Kaplan that “Thucydides is the surest guide to what we are likely to face in the early decades of the twenty-first century”², this article aims to reduce the complexity of current international affairs by historic analogy and comparative analysis in order to give answers to strategic questions of today resembling the ones the Athenians faced while embarking on the Sicilian expedition as well as during the fateful siege of Syracuse.

2. Comparative Analysis

Up to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the implosion of the Soviet Union, the usual comparison of ancient Athens and post-WW2 USA contrasted the dualism between Athens and Sparta with the bipolarity of the Cold War. In this comparative analysis a new approach is taken:

Let us assume the US still resembles Athens, but Russia looks more like the beaten Persian Kingdom, a wounded giant with vast resources, still meddling in world affairs but on a restricted scale and preoccupied with domestic problems despite its superpower ambitions. As protection from Persia is no longer needed, today’s Athenian Allies question the usefulness of a Cold War alliance like NATO that bears similarities with the outdated Delian League. Similarly Athens struggled to enforce the tribute payments in troops and money while being confronted with the stubborn reluctance of its allies to participate in military ventures and common defence policies.

Following this analogy, today’s Sparta should be China, which is challenging US hegemony by growing its economic and military strength in a situation that is ready to erupt at hotspots like Taiwan and North Korea and thus resembling the time of the treacherous peace of Nicias. While present day Sparta becomes the new protector of nations like Cuba and Sudan as well as inciting American allies to “revolt”, e.g. by investing in Latin America, contemporary Athens embarks on a venture that resembles the Sicilian expedition.

¹ George Marshall quoted after W.R. Connor, Thucydides, Princeton 1984, p.3.

² Robert Kaplan, Warrior Politics-Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos, Random House 2002, p.22.

The perception of ancient Sicily in Athenian eyes as strange, remote and unknown was probably similar to the American view of the Middle East today. The Athenians believed the tales of glory and riches to be gained in Sicily and from there in Carthage, Italy, and further, so that they sent half of their fleet and army to a foreign land that proved to be difficult to conquer and control. Syracuse, the leading city in Sicily of that time, was put under siege after a few neighboring cities were conquered or won over with concessions; a situation that resembles the present day embargo and encirclement of Iran in the Middle East.

Despite being distorted by almost 2500 years of history, different geography, and other obvious pitfalls, new insights and valuable lessons from antiquity might be drawn from this strategic exercise. Whether the analogy actually holds and thus allows foreign policy recommendations for the international relations of the 21st century shall be judged by the reader after indulging in this comparative analysis.

2.1 Power Balance

Whether the power balance of the international system in ancient Greece as well as in today's world can be best described as unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar is openly debated, but not central to this comparison. What matters though, is the delicate balance of power, which might be shaken or significantly altered by major force projection abroad. Both the ancient Hellenic world and the global community of the 21st century have found only imperfect ways to reconcile their conflicts of interest, demonstrated by the current difficulties to reform the UN Security Council or the ancient quarrels around the Olympic Games and the oracle of Delphi. In order to compare the power balance across almost 2500 years of history, it is most promising to analyze the roles of the hegemon, the allies, the neutrals, and the adversaries separately.

2.1.1 Hegemon

As hegemony, in the sense of dominance of one group over other groups, with or without the threat of force, has been a semi-overtly declared objective of both ancient Athens³ and contemporary USA⁴, it is considered reasonable to label both as hegemons in their historic context. Furthermore, for comparison's sake, the term "empire" in the sense of sea-based empire (thalassocracy), which may feature looser structures and more scattered territories, can be used both for Athens and America.⁵

Whether they perceive themselves as imperial or are regarded as such by their contemporaries is a highly controversial issue. In both cases, official denials of empire contrast sharply with openly expressed ambitions for global hegemony. Nevertheless, they both inherited their empire by defending themselves and their allies against foreign threats (Persia and the Soviet Union respectively) that were defeated with tremendous effort.

Fear of losing the dominant position, greed for economic riches and glory on the battle field were mentioned by Thucydides⁶ in ancient times as prime motives for extending an empire even further and could have their fair share of motivation still today.

³ See Cleon's speech (II,36) and Alcibiades' speech (IV,18).

⁴ See Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, 1998, and <http://newamericancentury.org/RebuildingAmericasDefenses.pdf>.

⁵ Despite the notional differences, the terms hegemony and empire will be used interchangeably in this paper.

⁶ "Fear of Persia was our chief motive, ...our own honour and our own interest." (Thucydides I,75).

Fear, as the main reason driver for hegemonic behaviour, generates arguments of imperial necessity, especially for military activities. Athens and America are naval powers that rule the waves (as well as air and space in today's world) to a large extent and are thus able to project their military and economic power to every corner of their respective world, that dwarf the capabilities of all rivalling states.

Greed for more economic riches seems similarly important as a reason to expand an empire. As both live(d) from trade and enjoy(ed) unparalleled economic power that is (was) facilitated by free trade with the Allies, isolationism is as impossible for the US today as it was for ancient Athens. Trade deficits as well as fiscal deficits, though, constituted already back then a danger to trading nations and incited hegemonies to use force to even out trade imbalances.

Glory, as the third motivation for imperial expansion, is often sought by aspiring individuals, who are likely to get drunk with power, or even by the entire population, if the masses are inflamed to agitators to indulge in collective hubris that often brushes away prudent voices as unpatriotic.

The legitimacy as the leader of the respective "free world" earned from the protection from a foreign threat is not only likely to wear out over time, but also to diminish if there are cases of lacking consistency and double standards as well as acts of atrocity. Regardless of an initial perception as protector, hegemonic behavior with a lack of moderation can easily be perceived as imperial and resented as tyrannical.

Similarly to ancient Athens, the US today is widely regarded in the Middle East as a "crusading democracy" that preaches the values of its political system and tries to impose them on the rest of the world while expanding its zone of influence. As long as former adversaries or neutrals decide to join the international security and economic system, which was designed by the hegemon for his allies, the empire increases in attractiveness.

2.1.2 Allies

Once the binding foreign threat has decreased or even vanished, any asymmetric security alliance that was conceived along the principle "protection for obedience" lacks purpose and substance. While the original hegemon cannot be content with a role as *primus inter pares*, the alliance members are often reluctant to continue with tribute payments and compliance to the hegemonic rules when protection is no longer needed. As this change of interest is likely to put the whole alliance and thus the empire at risk, a hegemon needs to enforce obedience.

That is why Athens resorted to putting pressure on doubtful allies by taking hostages, severely punishing stubborn neutrals like Melos for shunning the Delian League, and destroying cities of recalcitrant allies like Scione and Potidaea for having revolted. This earned ancient Athens significant fear and hatred in return, which might have been to a certain extent intended as these sentiments often serve as the best glue for empire. It seems to be a futile effort in this context to compare ancient Anti-Athenianism with current Anti-Americanism further, but at least the respective alliance politics deserve a closer look.

During the Cold War, NATO and other US-led alliances served their purpose against the Soviet Union just like the Delian League did against the Great King of Persia. Protection was offered for compliance to the alliance rules as well as tribute payments in form of money and troops for military campaigns. Similarly, the protective hegemony of the US was accepted as benign by its European and Asian Allies during the Cold War, not to speak of Israel, Georgia, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi-Arabia who continue to be highly dependent on US financial aid and/or military protection.

After most of the permanent and temporal members of the UN Security Council denied international legitimacy for the American use of force against Iraq, only Great Britain, Australia, Israel and few continental Europeans were perceived as true allies. Belgium, Germany, Turkey, Canada, Mexico, and even Chile had chosen to remain neutral while France was even suspicious of being an enemy.⁷ The imperial backlash was poignantly expressed by Condoleezza Rice by ordering to “punish France, ignore Germany, and forgive Russia”⁸ as well as Donald Rumsfeld by dividing up complying and non-complying European Allies into “New Europe and Old Europe”⁹.

2.1.3 Neutrals

For any hegemon, neutral powers are difficult to tolerate and constitute a dangerous precedent, as allies might prefer to remain neutral themselves instead of following the lead of the hegemon. In times of war, it becomes an imperial necessity to have the allies closely aligned and more than a nuisance if they prefer to stay neutral. That is why Athens so fervently opposed Melian neutrality and the US put so much pressure on its allies to join them in the invasion and occupation of Iraq. When US-President George W. Bush used the biblical option scheme of “with or against us” on the verge of the Iraqi invasion, a large number of American allies like France, Germany, Belgium, and Turkey stubbornly rejected joining the so-called coalition of the willing, thus denying the US the usage of NATO. Spain, an original brother-in-arms, ousted the pro-American government and the new prime-minister Zapatero delivered on his campaign promise to quickly withdraw its troops from Iraq, thus accelerating the disintegration of the Iraq war alliance as Latin American countries followed the Spanish example.

Just like many ancient Greek states half-heartedly accepted Athenian leadership and reluctantly delivered on tribute requests, several countries have been walking the thin line between allegiance to the US alliance system and neutrality, thereby continuously eroding the power base of American hegemony. Ancient Persia just like Russia today has mostly preferred to stay on the sidelines and mind its own business, gathering strengths for future encounters. If directly asked to choose between supporting and opposing the hegemon, neutral states tend to weigh their decision carefully, just like the Sicilian city of Camarina, that in the end opted for Syracuse. The Athenian Empire was perceived more and more like a tyranny in the Hellenic World and Sparta was able to disguise its own imperial ambitions by offering to free the Greeks from the oppressive rule of Athens. By forcing democracy onto others while allowing undemocratic states to be their allies, both Athens and America have not only applied double standards but also used the spreading of democracy as a pretext for war.

2.1.4 Adversaries

With the main adversary Persia defeated and marginalized but still suspiciously present in the Hellenic power game, Athens converted the Delian League into a hegemonic alliance by transferring the treasury from Delos to its own acropolis in 454 BC. The former ally Sparta then became the principle adversary of Athens’ imperial ambitions. Despite naval superiority, Athens struggled to contain Sparta in the Archidamian War, and then chose to sign a treacherous peace agreement under Nicias. Persia continued to be a treacherous neutral and undeclared adversary, ready to tip the power balance in favor of Sparta as it happened later in the Peloponnesian War.

⁷ See Tom Friedman’s column “Our War with France” in the NYT on September 18, 2003 and John J. Miller’s book “Our Oldest Enemy: A History of America’s Disastrous Relationship with France.”, 2004.

⁸ Rice, Condoleezza: 2003 (http://de.wikiquote/wiki/Condoleezza_Rice).

⁹ Rumsfeld, Donald: 2003 (http://de.wikiquote/wiki/Donald_Rumsfeld).

Having outlived and subdued the Soviet Empire economically, the US still regards its successor state, the Russian Federation, as a potential enemy that is officially neutral but occasionally shows its teeth as the world could witness during the South Ossetian crisis and the dispute about American missiles in Poland. China has often been declared as its main and long-term strategic adversary¹⁰, which, unlike Sparta, has so far engaged mainly in economic competition. Russia, China and most of the Central Asian States have been founding members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a strategic partnership that includes joint military exercises. The current US-Sino relationship therefore resembles a non-aggression agreement of Nician quality between the two most potent powers and possible contenders for world leadership. It seems to benefit the challenger much more though as China grows at nearly 10% per year while the US is allocating a large part of its resources in the Middle East that looks more and more like ancient Sicily.

Further adversaries include North Korea, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and Iran that were marked with the nemesis term "Axis of Evil". As membership was reduced to two countries after the Iraq war, Cuba, Zimbabwe, Belarus and Myanmar were admitted to the enlarged category of "Outposts of Tyranny" while Syria, Sudan, and Venezuela are considered to be associated members of the adversaries' club, which the current US government has vowed to reduce by working down the list with economic and military means. China assumes the Spartan role as the protector of non-democratic oligarchies and dictators like the "rogue states" listed above by sending economic aid, foreign direct investment, and military assistance and thus lessening the dependency on the US.¹¹

2.2 Distant Expedition

Now that the comparison between ancient Greece and the current world has been drawn, it is time to go into detail and focus on the crucial decision to embark on a distant expedition that risked the existence of the Athenian Empire.¹² In this sense, Sicily is comparable to the Middle East both in significance and complexity with populous cities, different ethnicities and religions ranging from indigenous Sicels to Dorian and Ionian colonists. Furthermore the control of the abundant natural resources of Sicily promised to give Athens the decisive edge over Sparta in future conflicts just like the US and China both value the control of oil, gas, and minerals as strategic.

The Sicilian expedition in this sense resembles the recent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, with Iran surrounded and pressured by American forces and allies, under siege just like Syracuse, the leading Sicilian state back then. Athens was never attacked by Sicilians like the US was targeted by Islamic terrorist groups, but Athens also had a previous incursion into Sicilian affairs while allying with Egesta and Rhegium against Messina and Syracuse. For comparison's sake the Sicilian analogy could be extended to local alliances with Egesta, Naxos, and Catana that could stand for Sakashvili in Georgia, Israel, the Saudi Arabian royal family, the Hashemites in Jordan, or Mubarak in Egypt.

The Athenians were counting on a shock-and-awe strategy, division of local powers and thus docile cooperation of the Sicilians just like the Americans were expecting flowers and local col-

¹⁰ See e.g. Kaplan, Robert: How we would fight China (<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200506/kaplan>).

¹¹ China is currently investing, among others, in Cuban nickel (US\$ 500m) and Sudanese oil, and according to Hale (National Interest 2004: China's Growing Appetites) safeguarding the latter with 4000 soldiers in Sudan.

¹² "if only you will make up your minds not to add to the Empire while the war is in progress, and not to go out of your way to involve yourselves in new perils." (Thucydides, II, 144).

laboration from most Iraqis, not just some groups of Shiites and Kurds.¹³ Both sent large troop contingents to a remote conflict zone, but still not enough to win a decisive victory over the regional hegemon, who seems to be the sole beneficiary of the expedition. In the following paragraphs this analogy shall be pursued in further detail starting with the reasons and objectives of such a crucial expedition, continuing with the financial and military resources employed, and finishing with difficulties encountered on site.

2.2.1 Reasons and Objectives

In Athens there were supporters and opponents of the Sicilian expedition just like there are today Americans in favor and against the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, US troop presence in the Arab peninsula, unconditional support for Israel, an oil alliance with the Saudis, and potential invasion or bombing of Iran.

The Athenian war hawks were led by Alcibiades who claimed that expansion of the Empire was a necessity to preserve it and thus advocated the expedition to Sicily. Such a war, he promised, would be easy and pay for itself and bring the Athenians control over the riches and much glory.¹⁴ The moral grounds of coming to the help of Leontini and Segesta, that resemble Arab regimes under threat from Islamic radicals in the first and Israel in the second case underlined the arguments of expediency and rallied the war faction around Alcibiades.

Cautious people like Nicias were denounced as unpatriotic cowards and faced difficulties while appealing to prudence and moderation. The American General Shinseki raised similar objections as his ancient homologue about the difficulties of conquering and occupying a populous country, the long supply lines, the increased number of troops needed and the missing exit strategy.¹⁵ Such Cassandra-like warnings remained unheard in America just like in Athens, thus ignoring the legacy of Pericles who had warned his fellow Athenians not to expand in times of war and thus risking the Empire inherited from the ancestors.¹⁶

By ruling over Sicily, the Athenians hoped to obtain a forward base to conquer Italy, Carthage, and with those added resources also extend their hegemony over the Peloponnesus. Control over Gulf oil and the Greater Middle East seem similarly important to the Americans in order to solidify global hegemony and dwarf the Chinese threat. Both Athenians and Americans ignored the fact that their main adversary was very likely to challenge their empire elsewhere in times of diversion of resources by supporting the regional hegemon, i.e. Syracuse and Iran respectively. Iran, as American archenemy since 1979 and rival for regional control in the Middle East, seems to be the main target of American force projection just like Athens aimed mainly at Syracuse.

In Athens, war reasons were mixed with moral arguments as camouflage for power interests so that the request for aid of Segesta, which is threatened by the Syracusan ally Seliunt served as a pretext for the Sicilian expedition along with intentions to spread democracy by overthrowing oligarchies and dictators in Sicily. The Middle Eastern parallel could be drawn with some stretch of imagination by equating Iran to Syracuse, Segesta to Saudi-Arabia or Israel, Seliunt to Hizbollah, Afghanistan and Iraq to Catana and Naxos, and maybe Syria to Camarina.

The debate at Camarina turns out to be a trial of Athenian imperialism where Athens has to justify its force projection and fails to win allies for the venture. The present day equivalent could be

¹³ "it is even easier than that, since we shall also have ... peoples who...will join us in our attack on them" (Thucydides, VI,17).

¹⁴ See Alcibiades' speech (Thucydides VI,16-23).

¹⁵ Shinseki, Eric 2003 (http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2003-02-25-iraq-us_x.htm).

¹⁶ "...this is no time for running risks or for grasping at a new empire before we have secured the one we have already." (Thucydides VI,10).

the UN Security Council, where the stubborn opposition of the so-called “Gang of 4”¹⁷ (China, Russia, France, and Germany) denied the US international legitimacy and forced it to go alone only with a small so-called coalition of the willing and thus appearing as intruders in a remote land where support of the inhabitants was as difficult to find as the claimed WMDs.

2.2.2 Military and Financial Resources

While it is daring to compare the Athenian economic and military power during the Peace of Nicias with America’s power resources today, a few similarities are rather striking. Both rule the waves as naval powers and dispose of elite ground forces, which are known to be almost invincible. The military technology and experience is far superior to any opponent, especially to others than their main rival. The collective hubris, presumed invincibility and disregard for potential defeat as it had already happened at Plataea and Amphipolis as well as Vietnam, Beirut, and Somalia respectively led both imperial powers to rely more on hope than preparation. Both ignored potential dangers, lacked essentials like siege engines and cavalry as well as comparably present day body armour and language skills. Both have sent the better half of their armed forces abroad, comparing the Athenian navy and hoplites to the US Marines, the 82nd Airborne, and elite special forces. Financially, Athens seemed better prepared for such a large-scale foreign venture with war chest of 8000 and a crisis provision of 1000 talents. America also has to spend large amounts of money on its force projection¹⁸, which is mainly debt financed and thus adding to the significant budget deficit. Whether American state finances will be similarly affected as Athenian public coffers will also depend on the difficulties encountered in the Middle East.

2.2.3 Difficulties

Obtaining supply bases in Italy, footholds in Sicily, as well as enough allies and local troops for the war turned out to be very difficult for Athens, struggling to win over Catania and Naxos as forward bases and continuously suffering from the defection of allies during the fatelful siege. Syracuse managed to survive the blockade and the siege by motivating the population to build defenses and counterwalls as well as to attack the besiegers from the rear. Furthermore, Sparta responded to the Syracusan request for help by sending the brilliant general Gylippus to Sicily, equipped with ships and money, which could be equated to the protection of Iran in the UN Security Council and undermining of economic sanctions by China in order to alleviate the burden of the US embargo.

The lack of Athenian cavalry and siege equipment is similar to the insufficient American body armour and language skills that make soldiers’ life even more difficult in the the Middle East. Both continuously need to send in reinforcements in order to control the situation but fail to have enough troops on the ground in order to successfully complete the siege. In fact, the lack of a Northern Front during the Iraq invasion due to Turkish “revolt” from the Allied camp as well as the continued gas deals with Turkmenistan and oil swaps with Kazakhstan are an interesting parallel to the inability of the Athenians to close the last end of the siege wall around Syracuse. In fact, one could view the race between walls and counterwalls of the siege as similar to the Iranian quest for nuclear weapons that would provide it with ultimate protection just like the Northern counterwall to Epipolae allowed Syracuse to survive the siege and keep the supply roads open.

A direct assault on Syracuse which could be compared to a full invasion of Iran turned out to be impossible for Athens due to the over-extension of the forces, the lack of cavalry, the low morale

¹⁷ See <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article873257.ece>.

¹⁸ So far, the cost predictions range from US\$ 565 bn (according to <http://www.costofwar.com> on Oct 25, 2008) to US\$ 3.000 bn as estimated by Joseph Stieglitz and Linda Bilmes (The Three Trillion Dollar War, 2008).

of the troops, as well as the wearing down and depreciation of the military material like ships in the foreign climate just like US tanks and trucks today. On top of that, the devastating cavalry attacks on the Athenian rear can be equated to today's insurgent attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan, for which Iran gets a significant share of the blame.¹⁹ Besides that, the intelligence services of the Sicilian opponents seemed to work with much more efficiency and local knowledge so that the siege required more and more Athenian human and financial resources that were offset by Syracusan cleverness and utter motivation to defend the home under siege.

Furthermore, Athens felt the continuous lack of civilians that serve as soldiers at home just like reservists today. That is why it failed to send equivalent troops as reinforcements as the troop level could not be reduced, which led to mutinies among the troops when things started getting bad. As the contributions of allies tend to diminish at least proportionally to the war difficulties, defections of local troops like the Sicels resemble the continuous disintegration of the coalition of the willing.

The longer the siege lasted, the Athenian situation deteriorated with the window of opportunity for a successful end of the expedition closing, if it was ever large enough. While the Athenians suffered continuously from cavalry attacks in the rear and never managed to complete the siege so that food and weapons could still enter the Syracuse, the US experiences despite the surge a continuous lack of security, exemplified by the road from Baghdad to the airport, where convoys are attacked regularly so that they have to be replaced by costly airlifts. The Athenians could have returned home at several points of the siege but their commander Nicias feared a court-martial-trial at home. As a consequence the besiegers became the besieged and risked the existence of their entire army and navy by foregoing the warnings. The decision to rather stay than leave may violate three principles of Clausewitzian military wisdom:²⁰

1. Both Athens and America lost their **liberty of action** by being trapped in the siege of Syracuse or the thankless deserts of Iraq and Afghanistan respectively. With the best forces pinned to the ground and resources overstretched, it would not have been possible for Athens to parallelly wage a major second war against Sparta or one of its allies just like the US finds itself in the unpleasant situation that it should not risk entering into another conflict, e.g. against North Korea.
2. Both hegemony didn't pay enough attention to the **economy of forces** by employing the wrong troops at the wrong place. While the Athenians left their cavalry at home and employed sailors for a siege, the Americans expose their transport troops to attacks from the rear and use Marines for urban fighting.
3. The needed **concentration of forces** to win a major siege on Syracuse or Iran is lacked by both Athens and the US as forces are spread thin and stuck in difficult terrain.

In the end, Athens not only failed to spread democracy, conquer Syracuse, and control the whole island of Sicily with its resources but also suffered a humiliating defeat even after reinforcements of the same magnitude as the first fleet were sent. The Sicilian venture not only didn't pay for itself but also resulted in the loss of the entire expeditionary force.

¹⁹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6353489.stm.

²⁰ See Clausewitz, *On War*.

2.3 Consequences

The American engagement in the Middle East has the potential for a failure of Sicilian magnitude with dire consequences for imperial ambitions. Assuming that the Sicilian analogy holds, the study of Thucydides should allow the Americans to reconsider their Middle East policy and avoid internal and external consequences similar to the ones suffered by the Athenians.

2.3.1 Internal

As far as the military is concerned, a foreign expedition with a siege operation that lacks the proper means to complete it successfully could have severe consequences for both troop and domestic morale. The continuous need for new soldiers to be sent abroad drains domestic resources and might require the US to reinstitute the draft, just like Athens had to send citizens from all echelons of society to fight a draining war abroad. The fatal expedition to Sicily might bring similar horrors to the American home land as it brought to the Athenian agora if a strategic bombing raid on nuclear sites or even a full invasion of Iran would be executed.

A continuation of the policies of the Bush administration by President Obama might prove to be similarly detrimental for the American democracy as the inability of Nicias to change strategy for the preservation of Athenian democracy. The continued siege of Syracuse had grave consequences for the ancient cradle of democracy as the constitution was altered several times to give power first to the 400 oligarchs, then to the 5000, and finally after total defeat and occupation of the city to a Spartan-imposed dictatorship. Unlike Athens, the American Democracy didn't debate much the necessity to venture into the Middle East but was bluntly deceived by its leadership with the pretext of WMDs.

By keeping the population in a state of fear and imposing increased surveillance rules through the Patriot Act and Homeland Security, the US risks to erode its democracy at home along with the loss of moral leadership in the world because of the scandals at Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, Bagram, Diego Garcia, and elsewhere. It could prove risky and irresponsible to curtail the rule of law and citizen rights, especially if the state of war is continuously declared. Having inherited a democracy and an empire entails the obligation for successive generations to preserve it and avoid disastrous external consequences as vindicated by Pericles.²¹

2.3.2 External

The loss of almost the entire Athenian navy and all of the expeditionary force in Sicily had also major strategic consequences for Athens as its allies saw this as a window of opportunity to revolt and were supported by Sparta which had built a navy in the meantime. Furthermore, Syracuse managed to gain regional hegemony over Sicily by defeating Athens under its walls. Benefiting from the increase in power and the glory of repulsing the foreign besiegers, the Syracusans extended their influence over most of the island. Similarly to Athens, the US is risking its global position by allocating its resources to unrewarding occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan as well as by pursuing a hostile policy of regime change in Iran. In the meantime China is gathering forces, building a high-sea navy²², and effectively protecting American foes like Cuba, North Korea, and Iran. The latter regime has managed to survive the US siege of trade sanctions and political pressure for 25 years and emerges as the main benefactor of the American invasion of Iraq that has swept away Iran's main regional adversary Saddam Hussein and instead allowed the pro-Iranian Shiites to dominate Iraqi politics.

²¹ "Our country is now at the verge of the greatest danger she has ever known" (Thucydides VI,13).

²² NYT Article "US rule of the Pacific waves faces China challenge" by James Brooke from December 30th 2004.

The strategic dilemma of the US is that it cannot simply leave the Middle East as a more decisive Athenian leader than Nicias might have done in Sicily. The crucial alliances with Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia as well as the dependency on Mid Eastern oil require an imperial US to support these countries financially and maintain a military presence. Staying the course as occupants in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as besieging Iran with sanctions looks equally bleak as it is likely to embolden the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and the Iraqi resistance while strengthening Iran as the leading regional power, which both threatens the stability of the Saudi regime and thus the US oil supplies.

At the same time China is enjoying the benefits of double digit growth and becomes stronger every year. As for now, it seems to be losing less from the global financial crisis than the US, which is heavily indebted to all other powers. The increasing independence of the European allies that consider lifting the arms embargo on China could be compared to the tendency of Athenian allies to revolt and change to the Spartan camp as soon as the Athenian defeat in Sicily became tangible. That is why any American leader that aims to preserve the dominant position of the US in the world cannot avoid considering all available options besides staying the course, which will be further outlined in the conclusion of this paper.

3. Conclusion

It is normal for empires, even for exceptional ones like Athens, to peak in its relative power and give way to more productive and ambitious societies. Such a decline might take as long as several centuries as in the Roman case or be accelerated by imperial failures, just as the risky decision to embark on a foreign venture like the Sicilian expedition proved to accelerate the Athenian decline. An arrangement with Syracuse and an eventual noble retreat instead of a continued occupation of parts of Sicily and a devastating siege would have provided an opportunity to preserve the empire at limited costs. There are multiple explanations why the Athenians embarked on the Sicilian expedition in the first place. Besides the fear of Spartan power and the greed for economic riches from Sicily and beyond, there was also an important element of glory seeking, both collectively and individually by leaders like Alcibiades. On top of that the Athenians were lured to Sicily by Egesta and encouraged by Sicilian exiles. In any case, an empire should know best what is in its interest and no rational person would expect it to do anything else but preserve its #1 position, even if it doesn't comply with the interests of specific allies and domestic industries.

If today's hegemon wants to avoid the Athenian path and preserve its world leadership it might serve to study the Athenian mistakes intensively and learn from history. There is too much at stake to simply stay the course, which has been realized by an increasing number of US foreign policy pundits that questions the viability of the Iraqi occupation. It might be exaggerated to speak of the invasion of Iraq as the American Waterloo or Stalingrad but the potential for defeat in the Middle East with significant consequences for the American imperial position is as present today as it was in ancient Sicily.

Iran proves to be too resilient to surrender to the siege and finds itself protected by Russia, China, India, and indirectly by the EU3, who seek a compromise solution outside the UN Security Council. This way, today's Syracuse is going to survive and sell its oil and gas on the world markets despite the US embargo. Iran increasingly looks like the big winner of the current US policy in the Middle East, a result hardly intended. Installing democracies in the Middle East might take too long and undesirable parties like radical Islamists or dependents of Tehran might be elected to power. The rising domination of Iraq by the Arab Shiites will be celebrated by their Persian brethren as an increase of Iranian influence.

With American military forces overstretched and pinned down in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as almost no further means to prevent Iran from finishing its nuclear “counterwall” and thus gaining the decisive deterrent, the US needs to reconsider its Middle East strategy if it wants to preserve its hegemony. Just like Nicias, who wrote a letter to Athens with a plain description of the facts, America should realize the damage that its policies have already done to its role in the world and change course.

Promoting a pro-Iranian pseudo-democracy in Iraq will probably help the American aims of securing its energy supplies and Israel’s security even less than relying on undemocratic pro-US rulers in the region. Ending today’s siege of Syracuse by embracing Iran as a partner for regional stability and sufficient oil supplies might prove to be the only viable alternative to the current struggle in the Middle East. Without Iran there probably won’t be a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Lebanese question either as the Iranian-funded Hezbollah is able to destabilize both.

As China is continuously gathering strength, the US needs to re-allocate its resources to face more serious challenges. It seems that the unipolar moment of the United States is already fading out only 18 years after the fall of the Berlin wall, with many regional powers incrementally gaining ground towards self-assertion and rejection of American hegemony. Whether China will be able to achieve bipolarity and form an equivalent of the Peloponnesian League remains to be seen, but there is little doubt that it has global ambitions.

The US will have to evaluate how much of its leadership it can preserve in the world. A strategic bombing raid on the Iranian nuclear sites or even a full-blown invasion would probably be as detrimental to the US position in the world as an attempt to provoke a military stand-off with China over Taiwan. The decision to embark on today’s equivalent of Athens’ Sicilian expedition has increased the pressure on the new Obama administration to reassess its strategy. Athens was surrounded by medium-sized powers like Corinth, Argos, Thebes, Macedonia, Thrace, as well as the huge Persian Empire that were only waiting to fill any power vacuum created by imperial overstretch and benefit from the struggle for Syracuse, where the besiegers became the besieged.

Assuming that the admittedly constructed analogy holds, there are many lessons to be learned from this comparative analysis. Ancient Greece would have been a more peaceful and prosperous place and Athens would have enjoyed its preeminent position much longer if it had not alienated its allies by abandoning moderate imperialist policies and embarking on a Sicilian expedition. Embracing Sparta, Persia, and even Syracuse as partners to share leadership in the Greater Hellenic world has not been an obvious choice for the Athenians of the past and the present. That is why the study of Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian War might enlighten the new US-President Obama to share the burden of world leadership with China, Russia, and the European Allies as well to open a new dialogue and establish diplomatic relations with Iran.

DIAS-Analyses

- 1 Rainer Winkler August 2003
Die Irak-Krise im Bundestagswahlkampf 2002
- 2 Rouven Klein Oktober 2003
Die Europäische Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitik (ESVP): Finalität europäischer Integration und Projekt dauerhaften Friedens. Eine Konzeption auf der Grundlage der Zivilisierungstheorie von Dieter Senghaas
- 3 Michaela Hertkorn November 2003
Warum die deutsch-amerikanischen Beziehungen von zentraler Bedeutung für das atlantische Bündnis sind: Deutschlands theoretische Rolle in der Mitte Europas (auch in Englisch erschienen)
- 4 Heiko Borchert Dezember 2003
Linking Corporate Governance with Good Governance: An Increasingly Important Foreign Policy Task
- 5 Heiko Borchert / Daniel Maurer Januar 2004
Comeback, Toolkit, or Dissolution? Five Scenarios for NATO's Future
- 6 Marc Houben Juli 2004
Operations in Iraq. The New Face of International Crisis Management
- 7 Michaela Hertkorn August 2004
Why German-US Relations Still Matter to the Transatlantic Alliance. One Year After the War in Iraq
- 8 Dimitrios Argirakos November 2004
Die Bush-Doktrin
- 9 Babak Khalatbari / Marc Lauterfeld November 2004
Under Full Sail in a Millenium of Migration? Enlargement in the East and "Push and Pull Factors" in the South
- 10 Babak Khalatbari / Marc Lauterfeld November 2004
Ein libysches Märchen aus 1001 Nacht.
- 11 Dustin Dehéz / Babak Khalatbari Februar 2005
Die regionale Dimension der Globalisierung. Konsequenzen für Staat und Gesellschaft
- 12 Marwan Abou-Taam Februar 2005
Die Psychologie des Terrors – Gewalt als Identitätsmerkmal in der arabisch-islamischen Gesellschaft
- 13 Roman Schmidt-Radefeldt April 2005
Die Weiterentwicklung der europäischen Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitik im EU-Verfassungsvertrag: Auf dem Weg zu einer europäischen Armee?
- 14 Henrike Paepcke Mai 2005
Another U.N. Secretary-General soon Decapitated?
- 15 Babak Khalatbari Juni 2005
Der Nahe Osten, Nordafrika und die Europäische Union. Mögliche Entwicklungsszenarien und ihre Auswirkungen auf Staat und Gesellschaft
- 16 Dustin Dehéz September 2005
Ein neuer Krieg am Horn von Afrika? – Die vergessene Friedensmission an der Grenze zwischen Äthiopien und Eritrea

17	Cornelia Frank Polens Sicherheitspolitik in der Transformation	Oktober 2005
18	Dustin Dehéz Somalia vor der Rückkehr der Übergangsregierung – Eine Anleitung zum Scheitern äußerer Interventionen	Oktober 2005
19	Glenn Gassen Finnland und die Europäische Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitik (ESVP)	April 2007
20	Marwan Abou-Taam Terrorismus – die Operationalisierung eines Begriffs	Mai 2007
21	Rana Deep Islam Education in Afghanistan - A Requirement for Assuring Security an Development	November 2007
22	Klaudia Köhn Česka Republika, Die Tschechische Republik im Überblick	Februar 2008
23	Florian Schröder Länderstudie Republik Polen	März 2008
24	Dominik Kneer Länderstudie Indonesien	März 2008
25	Stefanie Magin, Michael Schwarz Internationale Migrations- und Flüchtlingspolitik und die Asylpolitik westlicher Länder	März 2008
26	Cornelia Albert Länderstudie Lettland	März 2008
27	Philipp Schweers Still a "Civilian Power" - The changing approach in German Security Policy after 1990	März 2008
28	Mark Hauptmann Länderstudie Volksrepublik China	März 2008
29	Rana Deep Islam The Accession of Turkey to the European Union	Mai 2008
30	Mark Hauptmann Die chinesischen Interessen in den Sechsparteiengesprächen	Mai 2008
31	Kati Jensch Die Entwicklung der Auslandsinvestitionen in Argentinien nach der Wirtschaftskrise 2001	Juni 2008
32	Julia Kaazke Sicherheits <i>shalber</i> Umweltschutz?!	Juni 2008
33	Dr. Christian Wipperfürth Russland - Zentralasien - Afghanistan: Ein Beziehungsgeflecht	Juni 2008
34	Stefan Haid Why President Obama Should Read Thucydides	November 2008

DLAS ANALYSES are available at <http://www.dias-online.org/31.0.html>

The Dusseldorf Institute for Foreign and Security Policy e.V. (DIAS)

The Dusseldorf Institute for Foreign and Security Policy (DIAS) e.V., founded in 2003 at the Heinrich-Heine-University Dusseldorf, is an independent, interdisciplinary forum whose purpose is to analyze the field of foreign and security policy from economic and historical perspectives, as well as within the context of public international law. The Institute provides the academic public with the chance to exchange theoretical ideas in relation to issues of foreign and security policy and additionally seeks to provide the interested public with discussions and information necessary for the understanding of international relations. The Institute's activities also include lectures, presentations, moderated discussions, seminars and academic trips, as well as a publication series.

© Copyright 2008, The Dusseldorf Institute for Foreign and Security Policy e.V. (DIAS),
Universitaetsstr. 1 Geb. 24.91, 40225 Duesseldorf, Germany, www.dias-online.org