Thucydides on Peace

Thucydides is not generally regarded as a theorist of peace, but his theory of the causes of war contains important corollaries concerning the creation and maintenance of peace. I look at Thucydides’ analysis of the coming of the Peloponnesian War, and of his treatment of key episodes during the war, to draw out some lessons on the preconditions of peace. My conclusion is that Thucydides is very pessimistic about the establishment of stable, long-term peace, but that he sees certain kinds of circumstances as auspicious for the intervention of prudent peacemakers.

There may seem to be something Procrustean about treating Thucydides as a theorist of peace. Thucydides is known primarily as a theorist of war, and a highly realist one. This is understandable enough, considering that his only work is a chronicle of war which presents international affairs in a rather bleak light. Thucydides deliberately chose to write on the subject of war, and he makes it clear that he did so because he regards war as both a more revealing, and a more fundamental, phenomenon than peace among nations. He is even open to the thought, most prominent in the heroic tradition that preceded him, that there is something glorious in war (cf. Orwin 1988, 833). War in Thucydides’ work reveals the peaks of humanity as well as its depths, feats of strategic brilliance and public devotion as well as shocking acts of barbarism. Thucydides might well echo the sentiment attributed to General George S. Patton, that “compared to war, all other forms of human endeavor shrink to insignificance.” Thucydides would stress the ambivalence of such a statement, war’s abundance of evil as well as its glory. For despite his focus on war, we cannot say that Thucydides is unconcerned with peace, or that he does not wish that peace could be made more prevalent in human affairs.

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1 From the motion picture *Patton* (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1970).
In fact, what has been called the “humanity of Thucydides,” his humane or non-realist side, is seen most clearly in his abhorrence of the barbarism that war unleashes, and his consequent desire to limit war and to increase the chances for peace. The more one penetrates Thucydides’ presentation of war, the more one comes to see war as irrational and self-destructive, rather than heroic. Thucydides’ importance to present-day advocates of peace lies precisely in this: his credentials as a realist are unimpeachable, yet his thought is directed fundamentally toward the goal of peace. Thucydides cannot be accused of slighting or ignoring realist insights, or of taking a utopian approach to the problems of international conflict and war. He sees war as a permanent feature of international politics. Yet he seeks to maximize the space that may be reserved for peace within it. Studies of Thucydides have traditionally focused on his “realism” at the expense of this side of his thought. We may have a great deal to gain by approaching Thucydides from this side as well, to see what he can teach us about producing peace.

Despite the overwhelming presence of war in Thucydides’ work, there are islands of peace as well. Though Thucydides’ statements about the perpetual recurrence of certain types of events are all attached to his descriptions of war and related horrors (1.23, 3.82), he also chronicles moments of peace and tranquillity. Moreover, Thucydides’ presentation of these moments is orchestrated so as to provide an analysis of the conditions that produced them, and could produce others like them. We will focus on some of these key moments. Book One of the History, for example, whose theme is the coming of the Peloponnesian War, describes as well

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2 This idea has been expressed in different ways by Orwin 1994, Rengakos 1984, 9; Bruell 1974, 11; Strauss 1969, 292; Schwartz [1919], Reinhardt 1966.
the peace that preceded it. As is well known, Thucydides holds that the Peloponnesian War was inevitable, but his analysis of the causes of that war can tell us a great deal about whether or how such conflagrations might be avoided, or at least tempered or postponed. There are in addition two moments in the course of the war when peace seemed within the combatants’ grasp. One of these comes after the Athenian capture of Pylos, and another when the so-called “Peace of Nicias” is concluded. The ultimate failure of peace on both these occasions tells us a great deal about the obstacles to peace. Finally, there is one instance in Thucydides when a statesman actually produces peace by persuasion. The speech of Hermocrates the Syracusan at Gela, as narrated by Thucydides, brings together all the key elements of Thucydides’ understanding of the conditions for peace in international politics.

Peace and War at the Dawn of History

Thucydides sets the stage, as well as the tone, for his History with the work’s opening description of life in archaic Greece. More than a mere description of early life, the so-called “archaeology” serves to introduce Thucydides’ whole approach to the analysis of human events, and some of his basic postulates about human nature and behavior (cf. Connor 1984, 26). The portrait is not a pleasant one. In the earliest periods, waves of nomads repeatedly uprooted and dispossessed what tenuous settlements arose from time to time in Greece (1.2). In the beginning, it seems that no communal life worthy of the name was possible, due to constant

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3 What Thucydides says is that the growth of Athenian power struck fear in the Spartans, compelling them to war (1.23). The formulation is vague on when this compulsion came into play, and therefore at what point
depredation. When more stable settlements at length appeared, they were likewise prey to
marauders (1.5). No sooner did people learn the use of the sea than pirates took control of it,
plundering not only maritime commerce but all who lived on shore. It was only natural under
such barbaric conditions that people carried arms in everyday life (1.6), but the barbarism of
this era is even more strikingly revealed in the apparent lack of any civilized notion of justice (cf.
Orwin 1994, 30). So inured were the early peoples to spoliation that they regarded piracy as
simply another profession, no less legitimate than any other (1.5). There is no hint in Thucy-
dides’ account of archaic Greece that its peoples regarded invasion and uprooting as an
injustice, as anything more than the course of nature (cf. 1.2, 1.5; Pouncey 1980, 49). There
seems never to have been anything like a “peace movement” among these early peoples, in the
sense of progress toward peace motivated self-consciously by a desire for peace. Just as they
fail to regard piracy as a crime, it seems that these people are too barbaric even to long for
peace. They are resigned to war as the way of the world.

One of the clearest messages of Thucydides’ portrait of ancient times is the primacy of
war or violence over peace, of “motion” (Motion) over “rest” (Rest). The
archaeology does chronicle a slow, steady pacification in Greece, but it is a pacification carried
out by self-interested power rather than any more disinterested force. Thus Minos swept piracy
from the sea, but only in order to secure it for his imperial designs (1.8). Similarly, the motive
that drew many of the early communities together was nothing more than a common desire for
plunder (1.5, 8). For this reason, increased prosperity and stability in Greece seems in the

the war became “inevitable” in this sense.
beginning at least to have led to less rather than more peace among its communities (1.8, 17).

When peace did
come to Greece, it came by such instruments as greed or imperialism, by force of arms (v.
Connor 1984, 24-5). It was the peace of dominion, not of concord.

One measure of progress Thucydides uses in the archaeology is the growth of interstate
cooperation (“common enterprises,” 1.3), a criterion that seems to point in the direction of
peace. The archaeology does chronicle a gradual increase in such cooperation (v. 1.10-11, 15),
but once again this progress proves to be anything but a harbinger of general peace. Its first
conspicuous instance is the Trojan War. Not only was this a cooperation toward war rather
than peace, but Thucydides insists, contrary to Homer, that the basis of the cooperation was not
kinship, not the ethical motive of fulfilling the oath of Tyndareus, not indeed any communal
motive at all, but the coercive power of Agamemnon (1.9). This establishes a pattern for
interstate cooperation that carries over into the most advanced period of Greek political
development, as the Spartan and Athenian alliances demonstrate (1.19; cf. 1.3, 15). Once
again, self-interested power is paramount.

Thucydides’ archaeology does find real progress in one type of peace, domestic peace
or peace within communities. In the time of Agamemnon and the Trojan War, communities were
still based on domination and servitude, their common good found only in mutual gain (1.8, 9).
Two developments took the Greeks beyond this. First the carrying of arms in everyday life was
given up (a custom that long persisted in some parts of Greece, 1.6), a cogent sign of security
and pacification. Second and more importantly, communities arose that were formed on the
basis of equality and a genuine common good, rich and poor sharing equally as citizens rather
than organizing their community solely as a hierarchy of power (1.6). This development, pioneered by Sparta, represents a qualitative improvement over the barbarism of earlier times, the creation of true political community based upon ethical principles rather than simple relations of power. For Thucydides, it is emblematic of the achievement of civilization proper by the Greeks; henceforth, the life of cities and individuals becomes not only more secure, but more fully human.

Whether the attainment of justice and domestic peace improved the prospects of international peace, whether these more human communities were more humane to one another, is much more ambiguous. By Thucydides’ time, a number of important norms of international behavior exist among the Greeks, and are referred to by speakers in his History. There are elaborate procedures for the negotiation and ratification of treaties. On the other hand, neither norms nor treaties were able to overcome whatever forces made the coming of the Peloponnesian War inevitable.

In the end, Thucydides’ archaeology is ambivalent concerning peace. It chronicles two intertwined but very different sorts of progress, each of which has its own distinct implications for peace. The first is progress toward peace, though almost exclusively the domestic peace within communities. This is what we might call the story of the rise of Greek civilization per se. But alongside it is progress in the accumulation of power pure and simple. As the archaeology presents it, the two sorts of progress are closely associated. Civilization can only arise after sufficient power has accumulated to overcome the original conditions of chaos and insecurity,

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4 See, e.g., 1.77.6; 1.98, 1.120.1; 3.9; 3.53.1; 3.59.1; 3.66.1. The status of the international norms referred to by speakers is not always clear, since their interests might lead them to misstate the matter. Some of these
and power in turn is an inevitable consequence of more stable communities with an ability to undertake projects in common. Yet there is a real tension between civilization and the laws of power (cf. Immerwahr 1973, 17-20). Power in the archaeology is self-interested, expressing itself in domination and war, rather than peace. The suggestion of the sections that frame the archaeology is that the bare accumulation of power made the Peloponnesian War inevitable (1.1, 1.23; cf. Grene 1950, 58). And in Thucydides’ view, that war ultimately threatened to dissolve the Greek achievement, to return the Greeks to barbarism as well as weakness (Connor 1984, 104; Pouncey 1980, xiii). One of the key questions of Thucydides’ History as a whole is whether advancing civilization can tame the bellicose laws of power, or whether those laws, which have dominated humanity since before the dawn of history, are inescapable.

Peace as Condominium

Thucydides identifies Athens and Sparta as the cities that pioneered in different ways the civilization of Greece (1.6). Yet they are also the antagonists who drew Greece into the 27-year Peloponnesian War that is Thucydides’ theme. Less than fifty years before the outbreak of that war, in the aftermath of the two unsuccessful Persian invasions of Greece, Athens and Sparta had been allies, at peace. This period offers us our first real look at peace in Thucydides’ narrative.

alleged norms seem only to be principles of domestic morality transferred to interstate relations in a way that suits the speaker’s purpose.
Immediately after the Persian Wars, the leadership of Greece was informally shared by her two principal cities. Sparta had been more or less the undisputed leader of the Greeks before this time; Athens had risen to a comparable position as a result of her role in the Persian conflict. This period of joint hegemony or condominium qualifies as one of the most civil in Greek history. The concord that characterized the Greek world at this time was fondly remembered by the Greeks during the Peloponnesian War, as Thucydides’ narrative shows (e.g., 3.54, 58). At a still later period it was hearkened back to not only as a kind of golden age, but as a model to which the Greeks should strive to conform in their behavior toward one another.5

Thucydides’ presentation of this period reveals both harmony and underlying discord, both peace and obstacles to the continuation of that peace. These obstacles eventually provided the seeds from which the Peloponnesian War eventually sprang. They also serve for Thucydides as a reminder of the perpetually fragile and tenuous character of peace. His account of the breakdown of Greek harmony during this period is not only an account of the coming of the Peloponnesian War but a thematic treatment of the forces that always tend to undermine peace; it is cast in such a way as to present these forces in their universal aspect. By the same token, we may treat Thucydides’ account of the causes of the Peloponnesian War as an exposition of the conditions that may preserve peace, as long as peace is preserved.

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5 Cf. Isocrates Panegyricus 85. This does not mean of course that the period was free from tensions between the cities. For a brief account of these see Kagan 1995, pp. 15-37.
The Persian Wars were certainly “common undertakings” by the Greeks, within the meaning of the archaeology. The cooperation they spurred was based on a clear common good, and even bolstered a general sense of community among the Greeks. The Athenian-Spartan condominium that followed the Persian defeat began in the same spirit. One of the hopes reflected in this period—and in the fond memories that persisted about it—was the hope that the Greeks could forge an enduring peace based on mutual regard and mutual obligation, that the concord of the period was more than the product of the Persian threat. Thucydides’ account however suggests the critical importance of the external threat, and indeed the fragility of Greek harmony even while that threat remained.

The Spartans were acknowledged as the clear leaders of Greece before and during the Persian Wars. When the Persians were expelled from mainland Greece however, the Spartans began to lose interest in the continuing campaign to liberate the Aegean and Asiatic Greeks. When Spartan interests were no longer immediately implicated, her dedication to the good of Greece as a whole proved lukewarm. Eventually, Spartan lethargy and isolationism (together with the misconduct of the commander she sent out to oversee this phase of the campaign) induced her more or less to abdicate her leadership of the fight against the Persians. The remaining members of that coalition (mostly Aegean Greeks) pleaded with Athens to assume the mantle, which she did (1.95-6). This allowed Athens to secure a coequal position with Sparta among the Greeks, but it also laid the groundwork for the later schism in the grand alliance of the Greeks. It is worth emphasizing that this development was brought on not by the

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6 This is true only within limits of course. Some cities bickered about when and where to resist the Persians, and some even collaborated with the invaders. The memory of these differences resurfaces from time to time.
disappearance of the Persian threat, but merely by its receding to the point where it pressed some Greeks and not others. Sparta and others not immediately threatened withdrew from the campaign.

In itself, this did not imply any conflict between the two powers. The first episode that did create a conflict is chronicled with some care by Thucydides. The Spartans oppose the rebuilding of Athens’ walls, which had been torn down by the Persians, but the Athenian leader Themistocles considers their reconstruction a necessity. Themistocles undertakes the rebuilding project covertly, then defends his actions in a remarkable colloquy at Sparta when he confronts them with a *fait accompli*. His rationale rests squarely on the balance of power: Athens could never hope to have equal weight in the counsels of Greece, he claims, without parity of power (1.91). Given the supremacy of Sparta in land warfare, this could not happen without solid defensive walls. Without walls, in other words, Athens’ views within the alliance would be ignored, despite her excellent judgment in strategic matters. Themistocles concludes that the common interest of the Greeks, as well as the interests of his own city, are best served by Athenian walls.

Themistocles’ analysis is a monument to realism. He holds that even in the internal counsels of an alliance, among friends as it were, equality comes only from equal military power. We notice the strong element of psychology or perception in Themistocles’ logic: Allies will slight other allies whose power is not perceived to measure up. We may forgive the Spartans for being chagrined at the implication of their own ungenerosity as allies (Thucydides says they

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during Thucydides’ presentation of the Peloponnesian War.
resented this, though it did not lead to an open breach in the alliance: 1.92). As to the soundness of the realist rationale however, we note that Thucydides praises Themistocles more extravaganently than anyone else in the History for soundness of political judgment (1.138). Yet his principle, and the action he takes in pursuance of it, reflect gravely on the solidity of alliances, the status of international friendship, and on the peace that such friendships might bring. If Themistocles is correct, “friendship” is rather a misnomer in the relations among nations. Alliances bring comity only on the basis of a balance of power within them. Without this, any alliance will be structured de facto on the basis of domination by the more powerful member(s).

This principle receives striking confirmation from Thucydides’ account of the two separate alliances developed by the Spartans and the Athenians. Neither hegemon gave its allies equal weight within the alliance (1.19). For this reason alone the period of Athenian-Spartan condominium could not be characterized as simple or spontaneous concord among all the Greeks. Athens in particular became imperious, gradually transforming her former allies into “subjects” (¬B∈δ,8,∅Η) the term by which both Athenians and others refer to them by the time of the Peloponnesian War). To an extent, this initial Athenian “imperialism” was brought on by the failure of her allies to remain devoted to the common cause. Some of them proved little more reliable than the Spartans in this respect, forcing Athens to become ever more strict against defectors to keep the alliance intact. Nonetheless, Athens’ gradual accumulation of imperial prerogatives was “against what had been established” by the alliance (1.98), and confirms Themistocles’ view of the role of power within alliances. Thucydides’ own assessment

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7 A similar concern with allies’ perceptions of power haunts the Athenians in their dialogue with the Melians: 5.95.
of the allies’ fate is starkly Themistoclean. He asserts that they had only themselves to blame for being “enslaved” (”<\Delta ∀B 4Φ ∀<, 1.98): they preferred to pay for the support of the Athenian fleet rather than contributing ships and men of their own to the cause, which left them destitute of the military resources or experience with which to resist Athens when she became overbearing (1.99). Thucydides implies that once Athens gained such preeminence, it was entirely predictable how she would use it. The allies remained ignorant or foolishly heedless of this inevitability. They believed perhaps in a friendlier view of alliances, as instruments of international cooperation capable of restraining power’s tendency to dominate.

The experience of these smaller cities thus vindicates Themistocles’ realist view of the salience of power relations among states, even within alliances. We are even led to suspect that Themistocles foresaw the eventual fate of Athens’ allies. Themistocles’ principal interest however was not primarily in the small cities, but in the relations between the great powers of Athens and Sparta. His policy of rebuilding Athens’ power and restoring its walls was directed toward the creation of a balance of power with Sparta. It did bring Athens to a position of parity with Sparta, but the more remote consequences of the policy need to be examined. Themistocles’ explicit goal at the time was a regime of equality-within-alliance. Yet if he hoped that this balance of power would create long-term concord, or even stability, in the relations between the two cities, his expectation was disappointed. ¹ The grand alliance between Athens and Sparta split up into two camps, which in due course became hostile to one another. One of the key issues in Thucydides’ exploration of the origins of the Peloponnesian War is how the

¹ It is unlikely that the realist Themistocles actually believed that this would be the outcome of strategic parity between Athens and Sparta. His overall policy vision seems to have been rather darker (cf. 1.93, end).
two camps became hostile, why first alliance and then condominium failed, leading ultimately to
general war.

We already know that the alliance was first divided by nothing more than Spartan
lethargy in prosecuting the war against the Persians in the east. The dispute over rebuilding
Athens’ walls revealed an underlying tension, largely dormant at first but resting on causes that
plague the relations of states always. The formal breach between Athens and Sparta came later.
Once again, Thucydides describes the incident that occasioned it with some care. Thasos, a city
in the Athenian alliance, attempted a revolt, which the Athenians sent out a military expedition to
subdue. As defenseless as Athens’ other allies, Thasos secretly appealed to the Spartans for
help, which the Spartans secretly promised to deliver (1.101). Clearly, the Spartans had already
begun to regard Athens with suspicion, if not enmity, perhaps because of the increasingly
imperious attitude of Athens toward her allies (this is roughly 15 years after the Persian Wars).
Sparta failed to deliver the aid promised to Thasos, however, because of an untimely revolt of
her own subjugated population of Helots. This revolt eventually forced Sparta to call in aid from
her allies, including Athens. The Athenians, unaware of the Spartan promise to Thasos,
responded with a contingent of troops. After a time, however, this contingent was dismissed on
the pretext of being unneeded, but in actuality because of Spartan distrust of the Athenians. The
Athenians, realizing the true grounds of the dismissal, resented it enough to abrogate their
alliance with the Spartans, and conclude an alliance with Sparta’s arch-enemy Argos (1.102).

This represents the formal end of the grand Greek alliance forged at the time of the
Persian Wars. Once again, we note the strong role played by psychology or perception: the
breach here is a breach of trust. Sparta suspects Athens’ intentions. Moreover, we learn that
suspicion of Athens was widespread by this time, rooted, Thucydides says, in a psychological transformation many perceived in the Athenians. Many cities, not only Sparta, were wary of an Athens with rebuilt walls, due to a perception that the Athenian character had developed an alarmingly “daring” cast during the Persian Wars (1.90). It is this new trait that makes the Athenians seem inordinately threatening to their fellow-Greeks (Forde 1989, 17-25; cf. Connor 1984, 174). When the Spartans dismissed the Athenians from the campaign against the Helots, Thucydides relates that it was because their daring and innovating character inspired the Spartans with the fear that the Athenians might betray them and assist the rebellious Helots (1.102).

The peculiarity of the Athenian character runs like a red thread through Thucydides’ account of the events of these years. It is the key to understanding his presentation of the origin of the Peloponnesian War, since it was the growth of Athenian power in the decades before that war that was responsible in his view for unbalancing power in Greece, and bringing on the war (1.23). It also makes the conflict look inexorable, for Thucydides’ presentation of Athenian growth during that period reveals a city with an immensely dynamic and expansive character. The Athenian character is a conspicuous topic of discussion in the deliberations among the Peloponnesians on whether to go to war, where the Corinthians give us their famous portrait of an Athens driven to foreign adventures and conquests by no motive other than their own frenetic character. They argue that such a city is inherently threatening to all who surround it. On the

9 1.70. Kagan (1991, 212) regards the Corinthian emphasis on the Athenian character as an act of bad faith: they speak of character only because they have no genuine threat from Athens on which to base their call for war (v. also Cogan 1981, 25). Thucydides’ own analysis seems to be rather that the Athenian character is a great part of the reason why Athens does indeed constitute a threat. Kagan, consistent with his viewpoint, also believes that Thucydides is mistaken in his belief that the war was inevitable or compelled (Kagan 1969, 357-74). I should state that I am not entering the argument over the historical correctness of
same occasion, Athenian envoys deliver a speech in rebuttal that attributes their city’s expansiveness not to an idiosyncratic Athenian character, but to universal traits of human nature. Their well-known argument is that they have only behaved as all states do, dominating others when opportunity offers. Since they have been driven to their actions by three universal human compulsions—fear, honor, and self-interest—they insist that they cannot be blamed for their imperialism (1.75, 76).

This argument concerning the primacy of power strongly echoes the themes of Thucydides’ archaeology. It also presents the coming of the Peloponnesian War, indeed the causes of international conflict and the prospects of peace altogether, in a radically realist light. Volumes have been written about the Athenian argument, and Thucydides’ attitude toward it. The rough consensus, which I follow, is that Thucydides endorses the Athenian thesis in some form. Thus, while the Athenian character to a great degree explains Athenian imperialism for Thucydides, that character is not simply idiosyncratic. Rather, as the Athenians say, it is a compound of the motivations that drive all states. For Thucydides, the Athenians are unusual, or unusually threatening, only because the human impulses they speak of are more fully liberated in their character than in others’. In particular, the same motivations are visible in Sparta, though in a more hidden way.\(^\text{10}\) To admit this however is to see just how fragile was peace among the Greeks, how fragile it is among any nations. An analysis of the causes of the Peloponnesian War

\(^\text{10}\) The Spartan character seems to be a standing refutation of the Athenian argument, but it proves not to be: Sparta has already expanded to the limits of her power, by conquering the massive population of Helot slaves, centuries earlier. Thucydides intimates that Spartan timidity in foreign policy is merely a consequence of her being stretched to the limits of her power by this ancient conquest (v. Kagan 1969, 26;
in terms of the universal human motivations the Athenians speak of reveals formidable obstacles to stable or long-term peace in any time or place.

For one consequence of acknowledging the compulsory character of these impulses is that it becomes impossible effectively to separate offensive from defensive self-assertion in the behavior of states. The first growth of Athenian power was spurred by purely defensive concerns, as the city was compelled to defend itself against the invading Persians. Themistocles’ strategy of rebuilding the Athenian walls after the war, and maintaining a position of parity within the Greek alliance, could also be construed as defensive in character, as could Athens’ early leadership of her allies in the east, dedicated to pushing the Persians out of Greece. Gradually thereafter, however, Athens transformed herself into an imperial power. Athens’ own account of her policy emphasizes its continuity throughout this period, under the influence of the three universal motives of fear, honor, and self-interest (1.75-76). Thucydides’ description of the period bears out the Athenian self-description (e.g., 1.75-6; 6.82; cf. Romilly 1963, 59; Orwin 1994, 52). Athenian actions against the Persians, and then against her erstwhile allies and the Peloponnesians, appear in his narrative as part of a single, sustained burst of activity (cf. 1.97). The human motivations which drive them underlie both offensive and defensive self-assertion in such a way that the transition from defensive war to empire appears both natural and unavoidable, given sufficient power. The resulting dynamic inevitably undermines the balance of power, and any peace that relies on it. If the motivations of states could be limited to defensive fear, a stable balance might be achievable (though as Hobbes shows, even fear is not easily

Bruell 1974, 15; Strauss 1977, 191). As we shall see however, Spartan self-restraint might still provide a model for peace-makers.
limited to the purely defensive). When the more volatile motives of self-interest and honor (or glory) are added to the mixture, the chances of a stable balance surviving over a significant period of time shrink radically. It was the failure of such a balance that brought on the Peloponnesian War.

Many realists have attempted to make the balance of power a cornerstone of realist theory, and even a realist avenue to peace, but Thucydides could not be counted among their number. Balance may obtain for a time, under certain types of circumstances, but the experience of the Greeks in the decades leading up to the Peloponnesian War convinced him that the human motivations that compelled the coming of that conflict necessarily render the balance of power too precarious to provide a true foundation for international peace. During that period, first a grand alliance, then condominium, and finally the great-power balance failed. His analysis especially of the psychology that underlay these failures suggests that the only solid foundation for peace would be some means of inhibiting the expression of the human impulses the Athenians speak of. Perhaps a restraining set of circumstances could accomplish this, or some form of moderation that would restrain communities from within. Both of these possibilities are explored in Thucydides’ presentation of key episodes during the Peloponnesian War, episodes when peace seemed to be within the Greeks’ grasp.

**Minuets of Peace**

Tutored by Thucydides, we now must regard the peace that the Greeks experienced in the period after the Persian Wars as little more than an interlude during which the normal
sources of conflict were held in abeyance by the lingering Persian threat (cf. 1.18). Athens was a growing power, but her power had not yet grown to the point that it would provoke her neighbors to war. That point inevitably came however, and its result in Thucydides’ view was the greatest, most devastating conflict that the Greeks had ever known (1.1).

There are moments in the course of this war when the Greeks seem close to peace, but before we look at those, we need to remind ourselves of Thucydides’ own initial assessment of the extent of the war. It has not always been appreciated that, when Thucydides says in the opening paragraph of his work that he anticipated from the moment of its outbreak that this war would be the greatest and most devastating war, it casts a long shadow forward. This judgment is nothing more than a corollary of Thucydides’ view of the causes that compelled the coming of the war in the first place: Those causes had been gathering force for decades, and would have to be fully exhausted before the conflict could come to an end. This fact must color our interpretation of many key events in the war. Those moments during the conflict when peace seems to offer itself as a possibility, when one of the warring sides shows a clear inclination to come to terms, or when they both actually undertake negotiations for peace, are commonly regarded by interpreters as tragically missed opportunities. While it is certainly true that Thucydides regards the war as a whole in some sense as a tragic mistake, we must always bear in mind his belief that once the war came, it was going to be catastrophic. But this means that any overtures of peace before the final resolution are doomed to failure. Even where they seem to succeed, as in the “Peace of Nicias” that actually held for a number of years in the middle of the
war, their success can only be a figment (cf. Kiechle 1963, 299). The outbreak of further war remains inevitable so long as its underlying causes have not been exhausted.\footnote{This seems to me to be the real reason why Thucydides treats the Peloponnesian War as a single conflict lasting 27 years. Many modern scholars, perplexed and even chagrined at his procedure, split the war into two separate conflicts, the “Archidamean” and “Deceleian” wars, separated by the Peace of Nicias (e.g., Kagan 1969). Thucydides’ procedure is tied to his analysis of the causes of the war and of why they made}

Despite this fact, an examination of some of the abortive opportunities for peace during the war can help us understand the conditions for peace as Thucydides sees them. One of these comes when the Athenians establish a beachhead on the Peloponnesus at Pylos in 425 BC. The Spartans send a contingent to dislodge them, which is itself trapped on the adjacent island of Sphactereia. The prospect of these soldiers being captured by Athens so alarms the Spartans that they offer a truce and send special envoys to Athens to negotiate a general peace. These envoys reveal that in their desperation, the Spartans are willing to give up their war effort entirely, if the Athenians will merely release the besieged soldiers. This is actually a breathtaking offer, virtually conceding to Athens all the war aims Pericles had laid out for them at the outset of the war (and betraying all of Sparta’s allies in the process). The Athenians nonetheless reject it. The reasons for the failure of this peace overture become clear from the Spartan envoys’ speech and the Athenian reaction to it.

The Spartans begin their speech by insinuating that the Athenian success at Pylos was a product of luck (4.17). This implication may seem ungenerous, but it serves a serious rhetorical purpose. The Spartans hope to predispose the Athenians to peace by reminding them that anyone might suffer reverses of fortune, which in war can be disastrous. This might seem to be obvious, but it is a common fault, the Spartans say, for those who have experienced sudden
good fortune to be blinded by the hope that fortune will favor them always, and so to become grasping (∨∅,ℜ (Δ ⊢→ B8Ξ≡<≡H ,8B[:, *4 ≡ΔΞ(≡<θ∀4 *4 θ∈ 6∀ℜ θ B∀Δ ⊢Φ ∀ ∀ *≡6Zθ∈H ,⇔ θΛΠ ↑Φ ∀4 , 4.17). They speak ominously of cities with great power becoming arrogant or hubristic, and coming to grief (4.18). This is the path that the Spartans wish to turn the Athenians from. The wise or prudent city, they pledge, shows moderation at the very moment of greatest good fortune, a moderation born of the knowledge that luck can turn sour. The Athenians should be content with their partial victory at Pylos, and use it to secure a general peace.

The prudence of these words is hard to gainsay, which is why so many interpreters have seen this as a tragically missed opportunity for peace. The case can easily be made that a wiser Athens would have accepted these terms, particularly in light of the fate Athens eventually suffers in prosecuting the war to its finish. The crude and shallow demagogue Cleon, after all, is the man who leads the attack on the peace proposals on this occasion (4.21). But Thucydides makes it clear that in his view, Cleon’s fulminations are not the real reason for Athens’ decision to reject peace. His verdict rather echoes the language of the Spartan envoys: it was the Athenian desire to grasp for more after their success at Pylos, that led them to spurn peace (≥*0 ΦN:, Φ4< f< :4H≡< ♠ θ≡≡ΛH ,Θ<∀4 ©B θ∀< &≡β8T<θ∀4 B≡4, Φ2∀4 BΔ≡H Λθ≡βH θ≡¬ *∞ B8Ξ≡<≡H ΦΔΞ(≡<θ≡<, 4.21).

In a sense, the Athenians only mimic the Spartans here. Earlier, during the plague in Athens, the Athenians offered a peace that the Spartans turned down (2.59). The roles are

real peace impossible until the moment of final defeat. For this reason, perhaps we might even say that making peace prematurely would be foolish, as well as fruitless, for the combatants (cf. Strauss 1977, 22-21).
reversed after Pylos, yet the result is the same. The pattern seems to be this: when one party is
low enough to offer peace, the other sees this as an opportunity not to end the war, but to get
more. Thucydides shows us the deliberations on peace in the case of Pylos in order to illustrate
in detail why this is the case. The Spartans urge prudence and moderation, with surprising
eloquence. Yet the impulse for gain proves stronger than persuasion. We already know
something about the “compulsions” that stand behind this. The Athenians identified them as fear,
honor and self-interest (1.75, 76), but the way Thucydides frames the deliberations at Pylos
reveals another key aspect of the psychology of war. The human propensity to hope, inspired
by the role of fortune or luck in human affairs, looms larger in his account. Prudence is
overcome by the desire for gain because hope intervenes, promising to crown our efforts with
success.

The emphasis on hope represents a supplement to, and thus a correction of, the
Athenians’ own account of states’ motives, centering on fear, honor, and self-interest (Orwin
1994, 86). This supplement makes a significant difference in the psychology of war and
imperialism, and has an impact on how we assess the prospects for peace. Bringing hope to the
forefront makes clearer the irrational character of the motivations of states, the frequently
delusive optimism that goads them to grasp always for more (cf. Doyle 1991, 170; Kauppi
1991, 101). This can be seen clearly in the speech of Diodotus during the debate at Athens
over the fate of the rebellious Athenian ally Mytilene (3.42-48). This speech contains a
sweeping theory of human motivation, including the role of hope, which seems to be a
replication of Thucydides’ own understanding. Diodotus asserts that the impulse to transgress or to overreach is ingrained in human nature in such a way that it can never be reliably curbed (3.45). This impulse moreover expresses itself in all human conditions: poor, we seek by any means to escape our poverty; rich, we grasp for more. When opportunity appears to beckon, even if the appearance is false, human nature will be held within bounds by neither law nor prudence. Eros, Diodotus says, together with everpresent hope (elpis), lead humanity to the most destructive courses, and once they are set in motion no effective deterrent for them has yet been devised by man.

Diodotus wishes to persuade the Athenians by this argument that the Mytileneans are not wholly to be blamed for their rebellion, since their action was induced by universal and irrepressible human impulses. But his account also explains Athenian imperialism, as well as Athenian policy during the present war. If we apply his understanding to the Athenian case, it excuses their imperialism in much the way the Athenians have always alleged. But Diodotus’ exoneration is based on a somewhat darker view of the compulsions on which Athens has acted; he emphasizes the destructiveness of these motivations, not least to those who are in their grip. Fear, honor, and self-interest, the compulsions the Athenians identify, may be equivalent to what Diodotus calls eros. It is wanton hope, however, that plays the key role in unleashing these impulses in Diodotus’ account. And it does so by blinding men to their own folly. Hope gives
the underlying impulses even greater force, makes them more irresistible, and it does so by overwhelming the reason that would teach men their own best interests.

Diodotus’ view of human affairs is almost chilling. Applied to the Athenian case, it brings to mind rather Athens’ ultimate demise than her early successes, under the influence of these compulsions. It anticipates the Spartans’ argument concerning successful cities led to destruction by their very successes (4.17). Above all for our purposes, it suggests pessimistic conclusions about the prospects of forging peace against the universal human desire to have more. Pessimism however is not despair; Diodotus himself proposes a policy, based on his argument, for forestalling rebellion or minimizing its destructiveness. The policy focuses on the role of hope in the psychology of nations, on the premise that it can at least partially be restrained. The hope that lures cities to rebellion can be restrained in the first place by greater imperial vigilance, reducing the likelihood that erstwhile rebels would conceive delusive hopes of success—hope is not so utterly irrational as to take no cognizance of external constraints. When some nevertheless do rebel, Athenian policy should be to accept capitulation on reasonable terms, so that the rebels are less likely to hold out to the last, out of fear of being slaughtered (3.46). Diodotus’ policy concedes the inevitability of rebellion, that is, the impossibility of completely quelling the human impulses that underlie it, but tries to create an environment in which these impulses are less likely to express themselves. His emphasis is on the orchestration of external constraints that inhibit hope from arising in the first place, and secondarily on minimizing the damage when it arises nonetheless.

We can infer from this imperial policy what kind of peacemaker Diodotus might be in other situations. Just as rebellions can be forestalled only by preventing the ambitions of subjects
from being whetted and their hopes from being awakened, peace might be the product of circumstances which had a similarly preemptive effect on the appetites and hopes of potential combatants. Persuasion is not enough to deter in the absence of such circumstances, as the Pylos case exemplifies. Circumstances adequate to dampen ambition and the hope of fulfilling it could be a product of human design, but the task of orchestrating them at the level of international affairs would be difficult. Athens is capable of imposing these kinds of constraints upon her subjects by dint of her power, but creating peace among great powers would be a problem of a different order. Diodotus does not address the question of great-power peace, and his behavior does not suggest a sanguine outlook on the subject. He seizes the opportunity offered by a peculiar set of circumstances to achieve a humanitarian victory in the Mytilenean debate, but we never see him again in Thucydides’ History (nor elsewhere in the historical record). Neither he nor anyone else for example intervenes successfully to save the Melians on a later, similar, occasion (or the Scionians, 4.122). The circumstances in which the dominating impulses of a city like Athens can be checked are evidently rather narrow. Diodotus intervenes in the politics of his city rarely, perhaps only this once, and only on a relatively minor matter. The speech he delivers on the fate of Mytilene clearly links imperialism and war to folly and irrational hope, but Diodotus does not become a general advocate of peace in Athens, much less a voice opposing Athenian imperialism per se (cf. Bruell 1974, 17). Diodotus does not even explicitly draw out the broader implications of his argument in an attempt to moderate Athenian imperialism or Athenian war policy. The circumstances that might have given such an attempt a chance to succeed did not exist, and without these, Diodotus evidently regards persuasion as powerless. He also evidently regards the possibility of moderation, that is, restraint generated
internally rather than by external circumstance, as too difficult to produce or sustain at the level of national psychology (cf. Romilly 1963, 329).

The failure of peace in the aftermath of Pylos, despite the generous terms offered by the Spartans, confirms this point. All the factors Diodotus mentions here combine to prevent the conclusion of peace, as the Athenians are overcome by the hope that more is to be gained by continued war than by peace (4.21). The Spartans do manage to secure a one-year armistice, hoping that this taste of peace will convince the Athenians to end the war permanently (4.117-118). This hope proves naïve. Two years later, the “Peace of Nicias” is concluded, but we already know that Thucydides regards this peace as illusory despite its formal duration of some eight years. As illusory as it may have been, however, the Peace of Nicias is the most substantial attempt at peace during the Peloponnesian War, and so must interest us. As we might now expect, its advent is predicated on the development of a special set of circumstances.

The stage is set for this peace when Cleon the Athenian and Brasidas the Spartan, the two men who had been the staunchest opponents of peace, are fortuitously killed in the same battle. They are replaced in their respective cities by leaders more inclined to peace (5.16). At the same time, the cities themselves become much more receptive to peace on account of events in the war. At Sparta, desperation to secure the return of the men captured at Pylos, together with Athenian successes at carrying the war into the Peloponnesus, creates a general sense of discouragement. The Spartans had hoped that the war would end quickly, but it has already lasted ten years, with no conclusion in prospect. Spartan openness to peace however is nothing new; at this point, they have been suing for peace for two years. The opening for the Peace of Nicias is created by a change of sentiment about the war in Athens. Where the familiar
voice of hope had led the Athenians to think themselves almost invincible after Pylos, subsequent events have instructed them otherwise. They are sobered by a decisive defeat at De- lium, while Spartan successes in bringing the war to the east, where Athens’ subjects are only too ready to revolt, erode their confidence further (5.15-16). When, in addition, Cleon is killed, Athens is ready for peace.

The Peace of Nicias is made possible by the coincidence of pessimism regarding the war in both cities simultaneously. This pessimism is the product not of rhetoric, but of the direct—and recent—experience of defeat and failure. Rational persuasion doubtless played a role in the deliberations over this peace, but Thucydides, significantly, shows us none of it. His presentation rather suggests that it was only harsh experience that dampened hope sufficiently to allow the voice of prudence to be heard. The time is ripe for peace when this happens on both sides simultaneously. The window of opportunity may be small however, and the peace itself frail. The Peace of Nicias proves insubstantial because the two cities are only temporarily downcast. Thucydides’ prognostication concerning the “greatness” of this war, laid out at the beginning of his work, remains unchanged: the Peloponnesian War cannot come to a close until it arrives at the point of defeat or exhaustion. We now have a somewhat better understanding of why Thucydides takes this view of the war. Very little short of defeat or exhaustion is capable of neutralizing the underlying motivations that have led the two states to war, and that keep them at war.
Statesmanship as Peacemaking

We seem in Thucydides always to return to a pessimistic assessment of the chances for peace, based on the extreme difficulty of controlling the human impulses that lead to war. These impulses are strong in themselves, and they become stronger still through the influence of hope. Together, they lead states to folly and likely destruction. Yet this, we may say, is precisely the reason for Thucydides’ interest in peace. What practical guidance then does Thucydides’ book give to statesmen who wish to protect their nations from the folly of self-destructive war? Statesmen schooled by Thucydides will desire to moderate the impulses that lie behind aggression and war, thus increasing the prospects for peace. They will strive to “resist realism” (Forde 1995, 156, 158). But what are the conditions and the chances for their success? Statesmanlike reason could show states that their long-term self-interest lies in moderation, but we now know how dependent upon circumstances are its chances of success.

Where circumstances are propitious though, Thucydidean statesmanship might make meaningful interventions. Peacemaking would consist in recognizing and seizing appropriate moments, making use of persuasion in those circumstances where it can avail. There is a single case in Thucydides’ History where a statesman delivers a speech that results in the conclusion of a peace that may very well not have been forged without his intervention. The speech of the Syracusan statesman Hermocrates at a peace conference in Sicily (4.59-64) is a masterstroke of Thucydidean rhetoric. It epitomizes both Thucydides’ view of the contribution that statesmanship can make to peace, and the rather severe limitations of that contribution.
Perhaps the most striking thing about Hermocrates’ speech is the bluntness of its realism. Hermocrates begins his plea for reconciliation among the warring cities of Sicily by scorning orators who believe they can bring about peace by merely dilating on the horrors of war (4.59). Hermocrates to the contrary blandly asserts that no state was ever deterred from war by contemplation of its horrors, once it appeared that something could be gained by fighting. The terrors of war are known to all; states go to war nonetheless when the advantages of war promise to outweigh its disadvantages. Sicily is now at war, Hermocrates concludes, because each state is convinced that its self-interest is best served thereby. So long as this conviction remains, there is no hope of peace (4.59). Hermocrates is explicit that exhortations to peace can be effective only when states become convinced that nothing is likely to be gained by war, a conviction that is always temporary. He therefore confines himself to the narrow issue of whether peace is not more opportune than war for the Sicilians at the present time (4.59). He finds that it is, due to the security situation that has developed in Sicily. That situation is defined first by the military stalemate among the contending cities of Sicily, but also and more importantly by an Athenian threat. The Athenians were invited by some of the cities to intervene in Sicilian affairs, but Hermocrates correctly surmises that the true Athenian intention is to use this invitation as a wedge to expand their empire to Sicily (4.65). The other Sicilians share this fear, which Hermocrates believes is enough to get them to lay aside their internecine quarrels for now.

Hermocrates exhorts his listeners to put aside their differences and forge a “perpetual” alliance (4.63). We know from his analysis of the causes of war that this is nothing more than a

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14 This is the interpretation of Orwin (1994), whose argument I follow closely in this section.
rhetorical flourish. More congruous is his next statement, that the cities of Sicily should mend their present differences, send the Athenians away, and return to war some other day (id.; cf. 4.64). Regarding the initial invitation of Athens, Hermocrates does not even say that it is never reasonable to invite outsiders into one’s own quarrels; it is only unreasonable when one is more likely to lose than to gain by it, as is the case here (4.61). Regarding the Athenians themselves, he does not blame them for their designs on Sicily, or for their imperialism: expansion, he says, is in the nature of man (4.61). Consequently, it is for each state to take care for its safety given the real circumstances of international affairs. In a remarkable echo of Thucydides’ pronouncement on the fate of the Athenian allies-turned-subjects, he says that those who fall under the rule of another, when they have the power to prevent it, have only themselves to blame (id.; cf. 1.99). Hermocrates subscribes to the Athenian view of the inevitability, and hence the excusability, of imperialism and war, based on the power of the compulsions that lead cities down these paths. With amazing candor as well as consistency, he virtually proclaims that his own city, Syracuse, being the most powerful in Sicily, is most likely in the future to entertain imperial designs of its own (4.59, 64). Hermocrates simply maintains that the time is not now opportune for Syracuse, or any of the Sicilian cities, to attempt to advance their interests through war.

On the basis of his performance in this speech, we may safely say that Hermocrates is not the type of statesman many think of when they think of peacemakers. Yet, once again, he is the only statesman whom Thucydides shows bringing about peace on the basis of persuasion. His peacemaking is of a distinctly Thucydidean sort. The most salient aspect of peacemaking for Thucydides, as we see confirmed in every relevant instance of his History, is its dependence on circumstances that are most likely fortuitous in their appearance. Under many other
circumstances hope, abetted by capricious fortune, tempts men to test their chances in war. Peacemakers might wish that a heightened sense of humanity’s permanent vulnerability to chance might serve to dampen this hope, and inject much-needed moderation into the policy of states. The desirability of this type of moderation is perhaps the clearest policy prescription to come out of Thucydides’ work (v. Finley 1963, 128; Woodhead 1970, 43; Hunter 1973, 182; Orwin 1994, 192). But Thucydides is far from believing that any exhortation to moderation, even so elaborate and eloquent an exhortation as his History, can provide the basis for any reliable or perpetual restraint on the behavior of states. States’ long-term interest in moderation is never powerful enough to overcome the allure of short-term gain, when this awakens the natural human impulses we are now familiar with. The mercurial character of fortune, rather than producing a sense of vulnerability in men and so making them timid, only fortifies them with irrational hopes of success. In practice, moderation prevails only under a relatively narrow range of circumstances, when men are stinging under quite recent experiences of the disillusionment of hope. But the moments of sobriety are short, for hope springs eternal (cf. Orwin 1994, 167, 201).

**Conclusion: Thucydides and Contemporary Strategies for Peace**

Clearly, Thucydides is not a theorist of peace in the sense that he believes theory capable of marking a reliable path to peace, or of altering mankind’s war-prone ways in any

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15 Of course, each state has a long-term interest in restraint only if other states exercise similar restraint. This problem will be developed in the next section.
fundamental fashion. He believes the causes of war to be too ingrained to make that possible. He nonetheless has a theory of what conditions help bring peace about, a theory that can inform the actions of peacemakers. He clearly hopes that it will inform their actions. Still, his theory is more pessimistic than many others, including some traditionally regarded as “realist.” As such, it represents a challenge to much of the intellectual tradition of international studies that grew up after him. Exploring this challenge briefly will help us evaluate some contemporary theories of peace, and come to some understanding of whether Thucydides believes his own theory can contribute significantly to the advancement of peace.

One powerful and long-standing current of thought links peace with the achievement of justice. If justice prevails among states, the argument goes, the causes of war will disappear or lose much of their force. Hence, advocates of peace should mount a campaign for international justice. At least two separate issues are raised by this argument. The first is whether, and how, justice is achievable in international affairs. The second is whether the attainment of justice would in fact prevent or inhibit war. This set of issues is far from foreign to Thucydides; one of the major themes of his work is the possibility of justice among states. His development of this theme however is colored by his highly realist analysis of the causes of war. Human nature appears in his analysis as grasping, overreaching, insatiable, nearly irrepressible. To say the least, this is not a promising backdrop for the achievement of either justice or peace. Moreover, in Thucydides’ analysis these human impulses owe relatively little to justice. That is, they will set states in motion, violently, whether they believe justice has been outraged or not. These impulses are perfectly capable of upsetting even an international system free of all injustice, if such a thing is possible. Where injustice does exist, the impulse to right it is portrayed by Hermocrates at
least as only another spur to potentially self-destructive warmaking (4.62). In his argument, an outraged sense of justice is just one more opening for the fatal blandishments of hope.\footnote{The Athenians use the same argument against the Melians (5.111).}

For even if a state has justice on its side, an attempt to vindicate that justice through force of arms might well be counter-productive. It suffices to mention the case of Melos. In fact, there is no sign anywhere in Thucydides that justice \textit{per se} has any power (Grene 1950, 50). The weakness or fragility of justice is the real reason Thucydides would not see an increase of justice among states as a reliable path to peace. Justice is weak because there is something inevitable and compulsory about power’s appetite for dominion. This is the lesson that Thucydides learned from both his historical experience and his psychological explorations. Yet if power inevitably feels a compulsion to expand, this means that power will typically be on the side of injustice, or what is commonly thought of as injustice. But the common opinion about justice and injustice may be erroneous, for more fundamentally, if the appetite for dominion is compulsory, it cannot be unjust—states cannot be blamed for succumbing to what none can resist. If even imperialism can be exonerated in this way, as the Athenians say, it is difficult to see what room is left for justice at all in the relations among states. At best, it might be a rule of equal respect among nations of equal strength, as the Athenians also say (cf. 1.77; 5.89, 111).

Equal respect for equal power, whether or not it is understood as justice, is the basis of one common realist prescription for peace, peace achieved through the balance of power. We already know that Thucydides does not put nearly as much stock in the balance of power as many of his successors, and we already know why: the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War represented a spectacular failure of balance, brought about by the expansive impulses that
power exhibits everywhere. We explored this theme earlier. Still, important parts of Thucydides’ narrative point tantalizingly toward balance as a potential path to international stability, and hence peace. In the light of this, and in the light of the enchantment of post-Thucydidean realism with balance, the subject is worth revisiting.

Contemporary realists do not agree on how the balance of power should be understood, nor on how it might work to achieve stability or peace. Some have regarded balance as a kind of law of international behavior, a natural product of state interaction and the natural condition of every international system. Others see it as the product of particular circumstances, likely to be found only where at least one state in a system consciously plays the role of balancer. Thucydides would certainly not subscribe to the first view (Strauss 1991, 196); whether he would see the second as a substantial possibility in international relations is the question under consideration. A statesman could easily draw from Thucydides’ book the conviction that states should take on a balancing role, as a deliberate policy designed to discourage or contain expansive powers. A successful balance, after all, represents precisely the sort of external or circumstantial constraint on expansive impulses that Thucydides sees as the only viable route to peace. It also accords with the dictum, heard with some frequency in his book, that expansionism is to be blamed not on the expansionists but on those who have the power to block them and fail to do so (e.g., 1.69, 1.99, 4.61). This dictum concedes the realist point that expansionism is natural, indeed blameless, but points us to a policy of containment as the means of combating it. This type of containment could be effected by small states collectively, as well as by large ones.
Unfortunately, containment fails almost across the board in Thucydides. The question is, whether its failure is necessary, or might be ameliorated. According to Thucydides’ narrative, the Peloponnesian War came about not only because of Athenian expansion, but because no state made a serious attempt to stop Athens before her power became overbearing. Given the “universal compulsions” of self-assertion that Thucydides finds at the root of state behavior, this fact requires some explanation. After all, if these compulsions had been active on all sides, in the states opposing Athens as well as in Athens itself, one might have expected balance or containment, rather than expansion and war, to result. Indeed, if these compulsions were equally active in all states at all times, one might expect balance to be the natural condition of international systems. But the problem for many Greek cities in the period leading up to the Peloponnesian War was lethargy and inattention to their power interests, not expansion or self-assertion.

The Athenian argument about the universal motivations of states offers one reason for this. The compulsions it speaks of are felt only or primarily by the powerful—they are universal only in the sense that they will be felt by every state that gains sufficient power. The Athenians claim that power expands *wherever it is able* (5.105; cf. 1.76); the powerless, lacking the ability to act on such ambitions, would not conceive them in the first place. Athenian expansion, after all, began only after the Persian Wars, when a unique opportunity for growth presented itself. Before that time Athens was not an imperial power, and apparently entertained no such ambitions (cf. Orwin 1994, 46). The same thought is supported by Diodotus. He speaks of hope and *eros* gripping small as well as great states, but while great states seek dominion, the ambition of small states seems to be limited to independence (3.45). And the evidence of Thucydides’ history is that even this ambition is typically aroused only when states have already
been subjugated, and are contemplating revolt. The fact is, it takes a large measure of foresight, a great effort of will, and often a sizable expenditure of resources, to contain an opponent before it becomes a direct threat.

The problem for balance then is that driving ambition is typically on the side of powerful states, while the weak are typically apathetic.\footnote{Compare Ostwald 1988, 57. We should thus note that the problem here is not quite the same as that identified by international relations theorists who argue about whether states balance or “bandwagon.” Bandwagoning is even less in evidence than balancing in Thucydides, though it might describe the behavior of those cities that sided with the invader during the Persian Wars (see Strauss 1991). In Thucyd-} Still, given the ultimate destructiveness of this for both sides (if Athens is to be our example), self-interest does suggest balancing or containment. And nothing prevents states from foreseeing the danger of a growing power in their midst, and bestirring themselves to contain it. At a minimum, leaders in those states could exhibit this kind of prudence. It is here if anywhere that we should expect to find a Thucydidean prescription for peace, since Thucydides’ book is addressed at least in part to future leaders. Indeed, statesmen who read his book will be schooled by it both in the dictates of prudence, and the myriad obstacles to prudent policy. This education will give them a knowledge of what prudence dictates, together with an awareness of when this may be implemented, and when it may not. They will notice that the Peloponnesian War was filled with unfortunate political decisions that could in principle have been made differently (v. Lebow, 1991, 125-6; Johnson 1993, 63). They will also see that many of these decisions, such as the Athenian rejection of peace after Pylos, were apparently driven by forces too powerful to be turned aside. Thucydides’ view of the inevitability of the Peloponnesian War, and its inevitably catastrophic character once begun, implies very severe limits on political action once events have taken a certain turn. Within such a
maelstrom, small triumphs like that of Diodotus may be all that can be hoped for. But this does not preclude prudence from making more meaningful interventions at other points, especially earlier points. Containment of a growing power is possible, if it is undertaken early enough. Here the action of Hermocrates is heartening, forging a peace in Sicily to deny Athens a foothold there. More sobering is the realization that this is a rare instance. No other Greeks banded together in such a way as effectively to oppose Athens before the war, and the Corinthians must practically move heaven and earth to get the Spartans to stand up to their foe (cf. 1.118).

On the other side, what of the possibility that leaders of a menacing power might themselves have a better understanding of the self-destructive potential of unrestricted growth, and find some way to curb it? If Themistocles had been able to read Thucydides, would he not have been more wary about sending the city down a path that led ultimately to its catastrophic defeat? His successors certainly could have been more reluctant to stoke the ambitions that Athenian imperialism rested on. For although the compulsions that drove Athenian imperialism are universally human, they were enflamed to a greater degree in Athens than elsewhere. In that city, virtually all obstacles to their expression had been removed, in a headlong rush to power and glory. It may well have been necessary for Athens to grow in power after the Persian attack, for the sake of security. But statesmen who had learned from Thucydides would at least have been careful how they went about building that power, and concerned about how the Athenians perceived themselves as a power. The amoralism of the Athenians’ self-understanding only gave their expansionism freer reign, and made it more self-destructive in the
long run. Athenian statesmen at a minimum could have tried to bolster some of the traditional sources of moderation within the city, rather than destroying them.\footnote{Pericles’ destruction of the power of the Council of the Areopagus comes to mind as a case in point, though Thucydides does not mention it (see Plutarch \textit{Pericles}, 9). Pericles’ readiness to abandon the Attic countryside, thus dissolving one more tie to tradition and to piety, seems to be treated in this light by Thucydides (2.15-16).} If the reckless daring of Athens could at least have been blunted, the result would have been a longer period of peace.

Such a peace, of course, would still not be perpetual. Hermocrates’ triumph only bought Sicily some nine years of respite from Athenian attack. And even in a post-Thucydidean world, we realize, the presence of a leader like Hermocrates will be the exception rather than the rule. What Thucydides could have hoped though is that his work would at least increase the stock of prudence in the world, bringing an occasional improvement of policy, and with it greater peace (cf. Johnson-Bagby 1994, 140). Thucydides’ reflections on the events of his time led him to the conclusion that these occasions would be rare due to the power of the impulses being combated; this is what gives his thought a tragic cast. He amply demonstrates that it is in the interest of states, as well as mankind as a whole, to make peace more common, and longer-lived, than it is. He also demonstrates that statesmanship cannot bring state behavior sufficiently into line with rationality to serve this interest fully. But there have been statesmen, in Thucydides’ day and afterward, who have found opportunities push the policy of states in the direction of prudence and moderation.\footnote{An historical treatment of some of these statesmen, and an eloquent plea for prudence and moderation very much in the spirit of Thucydides, are found in Donald Kagan’s book \textit{On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace} (1995). I believe Thucydides would be somewhat less sanguine than Kagan regarding the likelihood that leaders such as Bismark or (Kagan’s) Pericles will be found when needed—and Kagan is by no means sanguine.} They were aware that peace is always temporary; but so is war. The improvements that may be made are in some sense at the margins of history, but
improvements they remain. Thucydidean prudence, when successful, can tip the balance to
some degree away from war, and bring us a greater measure of the blessings of peace.
REFERENCES


