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Athanasios G. Platias and Constantinos Koliopoulos, *Thucydides on Strategy: Grand Strategies in the Peloponnesian War and Their Relevance Today*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2010. Pp. xiv, 197. ISBN 978-0-231-70133-4.

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Over 2400 years ago, “Thucydides, an Athenian, wrote the history of the war”¹ between the Spartan-led Peloponnesian League and the Empire of Athens. This classic work has served ever since as a starting point for the study of history, specifically political and military history. The writers of *Thucydides on Strategy* rate the Greek historian (with Clausewitz and Sun Tzu) among the top three authors studied by strategists: “in Thucydides’ text we encounter for the first time in history an outline of a complete theory of grand strategy; a comprehensive theory of how states ensure their security” (1).

Athanasios G. Platias (Univ. of Piraeus) and Constantinos Koliopoulos (Panteion Univ.) [P&K] are political scientists, not historians, seeking to formulate a theory of grand strategy based primarily on Thucydides, whose account of the Peloponnesian War serves as a case study. Though they claim readers will need no special knowledge of the war to understand their work, they in fact envision an educated audience familiar with, for example, the geography of the Peloponnesian War and the writings of great military theorists and historians. Before tackling this dense 117-page text, readers would be well advised to bone up on the basics of military theory as codified by, among others, Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, Hans Delbrück, and Basil H. Liddell Hart. They should also have to hand another book on the Peloponnesian War equipped with decent maps,² in order to follow the many geographic references in the treatment of ancient strategy during the conflict.

The first chapter, besides stating (and restating) the argument, defines specific terms of reference, many of which are cataloged in a useful appendix. The chapter’s extremely clear handling of grand strategy and, for that matter, strategy tout court, is essential reading—itsself worth the price of the book. A secondary concern is the study and understanding of grand strategy in today’s war colleges and among military leaders and policy-makers. P&K contend that grand strategy should be treated as the fourth level of war, in addition to the tactical, operational, and strategic. They usefully define grand strategy as “the use of all available means (military, economic, diplomatic, etc.) at a state’s disposal, in order to achieve the objectives set by policy in the face of actual or potential conflict” (5). The “political leadership” devises grand strategy, whose “domain” (or “range,” in mathematical terms) is the “international system.”

The authors’ views of the interrelations of war, theories of war, and grand strategy are congruent with those of other military theorists, especially Clausewitz.³ But, unlike many others, they do not ignore contingency in formulating grand strategy, seeing every war as the interaction of at least two grand strategic designs unique to a given time and place. Thus, every war has its own “theory of victory.”⁴ P&K write that the study of Thucydides led them to their own theory of victory. They stress, first, the dimensions within which grand strategy is planned and, second, the criteria for evaluating a particular grand strategy after the fact. The dimensions involve: assessing the “international environment” or system; identifying ends; “allocating resources” to attain those ends; and “shaping” results to secure both domestic and international legitimacy. The relevance of this approach in our own day is obvious.

1. *The Landmark Thucydides*, ed. Robert B. Strassler (NY: Touchstone, 1996) 3.

2. E.g., Donald Kagan’s, *The Peloponnesian War* (NY: Viking, 2003), with map corrigenda in note 5 of the review at *MiWSR* 2005.06.01; or, better, the *Landmark Thucydides* (note 1 above).

3. See esp. book 2 (“On the Theory of War”), chaps. 5–6 of *On War*, trans. P. Paret and M. Howard (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 1984).

4. A term borrowed (with revisions) from Colin Gray (139, n. 25), whose praise for P&K’s approach adorns the book’s dust jacket.

Even more useful are the five criteria P&K identify for assessing a grand strategy's efficacy: "external fit" or suitability to a situation; (mis)matching of ends and means; efficiency in the use of resources; coherence, "namely that one element or one means of the grand strategy does not hamper the function of another"; and durability of a strategy in withstanding "mistakes and mishap" (18–21).

The book's middle chapters use this framework to examine the Peloponnesian War's context and "system" in the Aegean and to analyze both the Spartan and Athenian grand strategies: the former concentrated on offense and the desire for decisive battle, the latter opportunistic and focused on the attrition of the enemy's resources and will over time. They find the proximate cause of the war in the relative power relationship between Sparta and Athens, arguing against Donald Kagan⁵ that the Periclean strategy of a protracted war of attrition was the right one (57–58). Most of these historiographical debates spill over into some fifty pages of substantial endnotes.

The final chapter revisits arguments for taking Thucydides as an ideal starting point for studying grand strategy, touting his relevance to the recent political and military history of, for example, the Cold War and Israel's 2006 Lebanon War. Thus, under the heading "Underestimating the Enemy: From Alcibiades to the Present," we read that "recent experience seems to confirm this view. The disastrous Soviet intervention in Afghanistan is a clear case in point" (116), for both Alcibiades and the Soviet politburo had an ill-advised contempt for a prospective foe. On the other hand, P&K studiously avoid applying any of their insights to the US military's twenty-first-century involvements in Iraq or Afghanistan. The theoretical framework presented here could facilitate a fine examination of these ongoing conflicts from the perspective of grand strategy (or the lack thereof).

Military historians often shy away from this kind of political science theorizing. This book, however, provides a useful armature of concepts and definitions that could benefit scholars writing analytic military and political history at the international level. At times the repetition of themes makes the book verbose, but the selection of supporting block quotations from Thucydides (often in the authors' own translations) is spot on. Occasional interpretive missteps include ascribing a greater role to Thebes than to Sparta's pernicious ally Corinth in making a case for a multipolar rather than bipolar Aegean "international" system (36). Naval theorists and historians will find the chapter on "Periclean Grand Strategy" particularly useful. Indeed, on the basis of the quotations adduced here, it could be argued that Thucydides is also the first sea power theorist (38–45).

For students already familiar with the Peloponnesian War, *Thucydides on Strategy* offers a valuable supplement to existing histories. It is ideally suited for use in war colleges and military theory courses because it synthesizes so much material on the value of history, especially analytical history. The endnotes are practically a book in themselves; sadly, they are less accessible than footnotes would have been in expanding on many of the main text's arguments. The secondary-source portion of the bibliography is effectively a crash course in international relations and military theory.

Bottom line: this is not a book for the general audience. But I highly recommend it to anyone seriously interested in strategy, policy, military history, and security studies.

5. See, most recently, his *Thucydides: The Reinvention of History* (NY: Viking, 2009), reviewed by John David Lewis, *MiWSR* 2011–010.