



## STRATEGY IN THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR AND CONTEMPORARY MILITARY STRATEGY

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The contribution of Thucydides in strategic studies is due to the fact that he analyzed, for the first time in history, the two most important forms of strategy: the strategy of exhaustion and the strategy of nullification.

The most widely accepted and pursued kind of strategy is that of nullification. This strategy aims at the destruction of the military forces and equipment of the opponent through decisive battles. The campaigns of Napoleon constitute typical examples of this strategy, whereas the classical theoretical statement of it may be found in the book of Clausewitz *On War*.

The grand strategy of Lacedaemon in the course of the Peloponnesian War corresponds fully to the model laid down by Napoleon and Clausewitz, the Prussian general who fought against Napoleon himself. During many years, the Spartans attempted to bring about a decisive land victory. Similarly, they made every effort to achieve the same result at sea, when they acquired sufficient naval power to pursue this goal. In the course of armed conflict, Sparta proved victorious by land and by sea on numerous occasions. As far as land conflicts are concerned, since the Athenians chose not to come out of their walls to fight, the decisive victory was won as against the Argives and their allies in Mantinea in 418 B.C., thus securing Spartan sovereignty in the Peloponnese. As far as navy battles are concerned, victory over the Athenians in Aigospotamoi in 405 B.C. was the most decisive one in the great war. So, one may trace in the Lacedaemonian strategy the ancient model of the strategy of nullification, which was destined to dominate western strategic thought for many centuries.

The dominant position of the strategy of nullification reached its apex during the period from the end of the wars of Napoleon to the end of the second World War (1815-1945). The first instance of its implementation in the course of this period occurred with the general who was in charge of the military forces of the South during American Civil War (1861-1865). His victories in the battles of Bull Run (1862) and Chancellor's vile (1863) caused serious damage and brought about crisis to the military administration of the North. In the long run, however, the superiority of the North in terms of military equipment was sufficient to secure its victory in the American Civil War. It is particularly interesting, however, that the strategy pursued by the North, under the command of General Grant, was also a strategy of nullification. The aim was to utterly destroy the military forces of the opponent through the invincible military man power and surplus of military equipment of the North. It is noteworthy that, ever since, this is precisely the form of strategy which the United States armed forces follow in the field of battle. Mostly, they openly face and straightforwardly attack their enemy through causing various attritions and by using huge militia, that far supersede those acquired by the majority of their opponent States.

As far as the European continent is concerned, the strategy of nullification reached a point of perfectionism in the Prussian Headquarters under the leadership of General von Moltke. Through the

political leadership of Bismark, the decisive victories of the Prussian army in Santova (1866) against the Austrians, and against the French, brought about dramatic changes in the map of Europe, which culminated in the formation and foundation of the German empire. The campaigns of Moltke constitute characteristic examples of an approach which clearly pursues the model laid down by Clausewitz. Firstly, war was used as a tool to achieve the objectives explicitly put down by the political leadership, and secondly the destruction of the military forces of the opponent was the further aim to be pursued and eventually achieved.

The strategy of nullification was employed in particular during the two World Wars. However, the large-scale mobilization of the forces of the sides engaged in these Wars proved that it was impossible for victory to be achieved only through one decisive battle, no matter how important this might have been. The notion of battle extended itself to cover long and sustained armed confrontations, which lasted over weeks and months, unlike many operations in the Peloponnesian War (though one may therein also trace military campaigns of similar magnitude and duration). The Battle of Britain (1940-1941) is a paradigm example of such significant battles. The World Wars were pointedly and characteristically termed as “total wars”, because engaged in battles was not only the armed forces of the opponents, but, in the end, major parts of the civilian population and infrastructures, too.

The nullification form of strategy diminished to some extent, because of the creation of nuclear weapons. Since the end of the Second World War (1945), the use of armed force, that is war, as a means to materialize and fulfil political objectives did not altogether disappear, though it has been somewhat restrained, especially among nuclear Powers. It is almost certain that in the event of nuclear war, the States involved will not be able to avoid disaster.<sup>1</sup> However, the same conclusion may be said to apply in the case of a conventional war, that is, one launched with use of conventional (non-nuclear) weapons.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, this is not to suggest that the phenomenon of war is going to disappear from the international sphere. The post-Cold War era denotes that war plays a significant role in international politics as well as in the domestic affairs of States.

Powerful States have not abandoned their firm political aims, that of world dominance and primacy. Quite the opposite. States have recalled and pretty much implemented the so called strategy of exhaustion. This form of strategy gives emphasis to a number of means, beyond the military ones, and further causes economic losses and damages to the opponent. This strategy has a glorious past. The strategy of Pericles in the Peloponnesian War was one such form of strategy, which proved effective and victorious, at least in the first phase of the Peloponnesian War.

In accordance with the strategy and policy of Pericles, the Athenians avoided fighting battles on the land, choosing to remain fortified in their walls. By using their naval power, they discouraged or even frustrated disserts of their allies on the one hand, and they unleashed large-scale naval attacks against the Lacedaemonians, on the other. The immediate outcome of this policy was for Sparta to recognize that it was not possible at the time to dissolve the Athenian alliance and empire, and to come to terms with Athens by concluding the Peace of Nicias in 421 B.C.<sup>3</sup>

Many centuries later, since the seventeenth century, another great naval Power, namely Great Britain, pursued a grand strategy of exhaustion similar to that of Pericles, termed as “the British way of war”. The British strategy emphasized (a) blockades of European harbours, (b) distant naval operations against colonies of her opponent States, (c) economic support to allied States, (d) symbolic presence of marines in European countries and (e) regional raids in coastal areas of States of Europe through an impressive navy.

The United States of America, in order to face effectively the USSR during the Cold War, drew from past experience and implemented the strategy of exhaustion. The similarity among the strategy of Pericles and the American strategy in the course of the Cold War is striking and really impressive. The American strategy against the Soviet Union, as it then was, included the following measures:

1. Containment of the Soviet power and influence through a network of alliances around the frontiers of the USSR. (This policy is actually still pursued by the USA in the post-Cold War era.)
2. Economic preclusion of the USSR from having access to the economy and technology of the Western world.
3. Undermining of the legitimacy of the Soviet internal political system through providing support to political opposition parties and groups
4. Strengthening the technological and military capacity of the USA (through “Star Wars”, for instance), so that the USSR might reach a point of economic exhaustion.
5. Emphasizing the leadership role of the USA in the West.
6. Keeping large budgets for defense purposes over long periods of time, so that the balance of power might be retained.
7. Supporting enemies of the USSR, for example Afghanistan.
8. Undermining the USSR internationally, by stressing the “illegitimate” character of the Soviet governmental system and model.

As a result, the Soviet Union could not sustain American pressures any longer, and therefore its political system, as it was then structured, collapsed soon afterwards (1989-1990).

The Cold War is not the only modern instance of the use of the strategy of exhaustion. This strategy was also pursued by the United States and allied countries in Bosnia in 1995. The USA employed a variety of measures, so that they might bring about exhaustion of their opponent: economic war, diplomatic isolation of Bosnia, political pressures, to name a few. The air strikes which ensued were not but a single measure among those implemented by the Americans in that crisis. Prior to those strikes and air raids, the Serbs of Bosnia were already economically weakened and diplomatically isolated. Further, the USA had influenced the local balance-of-power by providing military equipment to Croatia and Bosnian Muslims, plainly put, the enemies of Bosnian Serbs, and had also encouraged formation of military alliances among Croatians and Muslims of Bosnia. Finally, the USA made sure that public opinion in the United States was firmly for the operations in Bosnia, in an effort to legalize its actions in a way. These strategic elements and methods, when having been used, were sufficient to effectuate acceptance on part of the Serbs of the terms laid down by the USA and NATO in the context of the Dayton Agreement.

In the years to come, the strategy of exhaustion may be further used, in view of the sensitivity shown by western societies stemming from the vicissitudes of war and its losses, as well as the rising cost of maintaining strong armies and capably using military power in armed operations internationally. Processing information for military purposes and other methods are expected to succor significantly the use of armed force. A parallel, rather distant on this occasion, may be inferred from the strategy of Pericles in the Peloponnesian War. Some Athenian achievements of the day, for example the build-up of powerful and fast triremes, reinforced naval operations, which thus became an indispensable part of the strategy of Pericles.

The world will most likely witness, if this has not already been witnessed, wars which will mainly comprise air strikes and economic embargos (see for example the first Iraqi War in 1991). This kind of war may

actually find its close parallel in the strategy of Pericles. Naval operations commonly pursued by Pericles is the counterpart of the modern use of submarines and aircraft carriers that primarily bring about heavy destruction of the opponent's military forces and simultaneously lessen the possibility of grave losses to the detriment of States using the above-mentioned methods and strategy by large.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the above, the primary importance attached by experts in International Politics and Strategic Studies to the strategy of exhaustion, the strategy of nullification the pioneer of which is the State of Sparta, has not at all been eliminated. It is noteworthy that even the strategy of Pericles was mostly successful only when it pursued the fundamental and powerful strategy of nullification, which involves face-to-face military attack against the enemy. The incident of Pylos and Sphacteria attest to the credibility of this strategy and the truth of these words.<sup>5</sup> In modern international politics, the war of Iraq in 2001 and 2011 respectively demonstrate the primacy that is still attached to this form of strategy. Iraq had already faced economic and political pressures prior to the air raids, but the latter were mainly the ones that brought about destruction of the Iraqi military forces and equipment. Final and total subjugation of Iraq came with the protracted land campaigns of the USA in the Iraqi mainland, where the Americans proved that they are magnificently well-trained to sustain the peculiar morphology and climatic conditions of a desert. Thus, the Thucydidean and Napoleonic model still stands firmly in modern International Politics.

Only recently, though, in 2014, the USA was skeptical in launching air and land military operations against Syria, not because the American strategic analysts ceased to be more keen on practicing the strategy of nullification, but because of the danger originating from the neighboring State of Iran unleashing weapons of mass destruction against the Israeli State. This danger was further reinforced by the fact that Russia, with its strong military base in the area, would most likely have been involved in that armed crisis.

In the future, if one might foretell political developments in this regard, the military strategy to be predominantly used will be that of nullification. The objective will be the classic one, that is, total destruction of the enemy's military forces. Both the USA and Russia will most probably attempt to take advantage of their enormous capacity in terms of land, air and sea power.

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**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> It goes without saying that the threat of use of nuclear weapons is still employed as a means of policy. Quote the Advisory Opinion on Nuclear Weapons.

<sup>2</sup> See John Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 1-66, where it is stated that theoretically it is still possible for States to achieve victory quickly in the course of a conventional war, thus avoiding to incur the severe losses of such a protracted non-nuclear war.

<sup>3</sup> In the final sections of his first speech, Pericles must convince the Athenians that Attica, land Athens has held for hundreds of years, should be sacrificed so that Athens can fight a war to protect her claim on an overseas empire. In order to accomplish this, Pericles argues not that Attica has been wasted before by Athens' enemies, and that the Athenians know from experience that Attica can recover, but much more radically that Attica is dispensable:

If they attack our land with their infantry, we will sail against theirs, and it will not be the same thing for some part of the Peloponnesus to be wasted as for all of Attica [to be wasted]. For they will not have any other place they can take as a replacement without a battle, but we have much land both on the islands and the continent. For control of the sea is a great thing (μέγα το της θαλάσσης κράτος). Only consider: if we were islanders, who would be harder to capture? (Thucydides, 1.143.4-5)

All of Attica can be wasted without much harm to Athens, Pericles argues since this loss can be compensated with holdings elsewhere. Although the allies' land must be taken and held by force, Pericles does not distinguish Athens' ownership of this land from Athens ownership of territory in Attica. His rhetorical stance throughout the speeches will be to treat allied land as a unified and subordinated entity, particular problems with which he will not address. (Edith Foster, *Thucydides, Pericles, and Periclean Imperialism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 147).

<sup>4</sup> For you [Athenians] believe that you rule only the allies. But I argue that of the two visibly useful parts of the world, namely earth and sea, you are the absolute masters of all of the latter, both to the extent that you now possess it and also to whatever extent you wish, since no one, neither the King nor any other people of those presently existing will hinder you from sailing with your present naval resources. (Thucydides, 2.62.2)

Athens rules the empire and the Athenian navy is invincible, Pericles argues, by any human force; furthermore, no one can hinder the Athenians from making themselves masters of as much of the sea as they wish: the sea, an element of the world, is a possession of their will. Like gods, the Athenians will decide their wishes (these will include possessing more of the world) and fulfill them, such is the power of Athens' navy to elevate mortal men. But, see Edith Foster, *Thucydides, Pericles, and Periclean Imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 187: Pericles' claims are un-Thucydidean, and ought to have been un-Periclean: Thucydides repeatedly shows that Pericles knew both Athens' vulnerabilities, and also the real extent of Athens' resources, down to the last penny.

<sup>5</sup> Ἐγένετο τε ὁ θόρυβος μέγας καὶ ἀντηλλαγμένος τοῦ ἑκατέρων τρόπου περὶ τὰς ναῦς. Ὡστε Ἀθηναίους Λακεδαιμονίους μὲν, ὑπὸ προθυμίας καὶ ἐκπλήξεως ὡς εἶπεῖν ἐκ γῆς τε καὶ ταύτης Λακωνικῆς καὶ ἐς τὴν ἑαυτῶν πολεμίων οὕσαν ἐκ γῆς ἐναυμάχουν. Ἀθηναίους ἀπὸ νεῶν ἐπεζομάχουν. Clearly Athenians did not launch a naval attack in the strict sense of the word but were conducting a land fighting though being in their own vessels.